Conflicts are inevitable. They are part of all relationships between individuals who work together. By better understanding the factors that contribute to conflict and their impact on each of the parties, we are in a better position to intervene earlier and put in place more effective intervention strategies.

Conflict is internal discord that occurs because of a difference in ideas, values or perceptions or in the interpretation of a situation (Marquid, cited by Kelley, 2006). It is a disagreement expressed between two or more parties because they perceive an incompatibility between common goals or interests, preventing them from achieving their own goals (Wilmot, cited in Sportsman et al., 2007).

Conflict between a supervisor and a student is an interpersonal conflict. It can take on several forms, such as verbal abuse, hostility, a breakdown in communication, etc. (Kelley, 2006). There are several reasons that conflict may arise during supervision. Some of those reasons are a difference in personalities, learning styles, values and expectations, a lack of knowledge, and so forth.

This being said, it is important to distinguish between a conflict and a problem. A problem is a difficulty or issue to be resolved that requires discussion. It is an unstable situation requiring a decision (Multi dictionnaire de la langue française, 2009; Le Petit Robert, 2009). In a practicum situation, problems arise when there is a misunderstanding or contradiction between the supervisor's expectations and the student's actual performance. If it is not resolved quickly, it can degenerate into conflict.

The supervisor's and the student's perception of a conflict may be different. A study by Manchur et al. (2003) found that 51% of students perceive that they are frequently in a conflict situation with their supervisor. In contrast, only 16% of supervisors perceive that they are frequently in a conflict situation with their students.

This finding reinforces the need to constantly verify each party's perceptions by having regular discussions with your student.

Along the same lines, students do not identify the same potential triggers for conflict as supervisors do.
Here are a few causes of conflict identified by students:

- The supervisor’s expectations (ambiguous or not provided)
- The length and frequency of the supervision (too much or not enough)
- Personal factors (values, personality, perceptions, etc.)
- Lack of feedback on successful interventions

Here are a few causes identified by supervisors:

- The supervisor’s expectations (too high)
- The student’s expectations (different from the supervisor’s)
- The student’s level of knowledge (inadequate)
- The student’s competency level (too low)

Success factors

Conflict itself is neutral. It is how conflict is managed that determines whether it will have negative or positive consequences on our relationships. A well managed conflict can actually strengthen a relationship with the student, increase motivation and contribute to personal growth. Here are seven tips for having a positive outcome to conflict:

1. Avoid letting the situation drag on: meet with the student as soon as possible when there are daily irritants.
2. Remain calm, open and flexible: suggest to your student that he discuss his concerns, show openness.
3. Take the time needed: set aside a longer period of time for the discussion when problems have come up during the day.
4. Encourage dialogue: encourage the student to share his comments, make it a two-way discussion. Each person describes his perception of the situation by using “I” statements. Do not interrupt. Paraphrase what was said.
5. Treat the other person with respect: avoid the word “always” (e.g.: “You always do that!”). That leads to unfounded generalities and can provoke defensive or argumentative responses.
6. Focus on the conflict: do not judge the other person or personalize the conflict. Separate facts from opinions. Remain in the present.
7. Be as objective as possible: do not let feelings cloud your judgment.

All of these factors will help to create a climate of trust and consequently, contribute to the success of the resolution process.
The following sites offer useful information on the causes of conflicts, a conflict resolution map, the concepts of interests and position, impact, evolution and conflict management styles, etc.: www.mcgill.ca/hssaccess/two/supervision, www.practiceeducation.ca and www.preceptor.ca.