

CONFLICT COACHING FOR THE WORKPLACE

by Cinnie Noble

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Conflict is costly to organizations. Low morale and productivity, stress, illness, absenteeism, litigation due to unnecessary disputes and so on, all contribute to workplaces that breed destructive interactions. Besides the adverse impact conflict has on the bottom line, it also reflects poorly on the organization's reputation, its place in the community, its leaders and the pride of everyone else who works within its doors. Many organizations tend to react to conflict, rather than consider preventative measures and other ways to shift their culture to be conflict competent. In this regard, conflict coaching is emerging as a viable and proactive mechanism.

Conflict Coaching

Conflict coaching is a unique niche which unites the fields of coaching and dispute resolution. Its premise is essentially that it is possible to remove the toxic effects of conflict and to create opportunities to grow relationships and work environments from differences that do arise. The main objectives of this specialized process then, are to coach participants to:

- o identify their goals for managing conflict effectively
- o reflect on the ways they react and contribute to conflict
- o consider and develop alternate ways to approach conflict
- o shift unhelpful reactions to conflict to constructive responses
- o improve language and communication skills in order to interact and address conflictual situations more effectively
- o reduce the harmful impact of conflict on themselves and others

One-on-one conflict coaching is a powerful tool. Coaching sessions average one hour per week for whatever duration may be needed and are conducted by telephone, face-to-face or electronically. During these sessions, the focus is on each individual's conflict management goals and needs. For instance, conflict coaching may be used to help people who find themselves constantly engaged in unproductive conflict. These clients examine the patterns, themes and elements of conflict that adversely affect them and others. They are coached to replace habitual conflict conduct to behaviour that is aimed at preventing unnecessary disputes and resolving the ones that do arise, in collaborative and mutually satisfying ways.

Conflict coaching may also be dispute specific. In these instances, the participants focus on a particular dispute that is adversely affecting their job and working relationships. Coaching in these cases, guides the person to conduct a structured analysis of the dispute, to gain insights about their conflict conduct and to engage in a problem-solving dialogue with the ‘other person’. Whether for general conflict traits or specific disputes, the intent of conflict coaching is to help clients transform the way they “do” conflict.

For both general and dispute-specific coaching, various tools and techniques may be incorporated, including the use of conflict assessment instruments. One of these tools is the Conflict Dynamics Profile™. Among other things, this unique 360° developmental tool helps people to understand how they respond to conflict and how they are perceived to do so, by their peers, direct reports and boss. The results provide a basis for coaching people to shift destructive reactions to conflict, to constructive responses and other related aspects with respect to improving conflict management.

Other Mechanisms

In addition to one-on-one coaching, many organizations also integrate other mechanisms for enhancing and sustaining conflict management skills. Examples include communication workshops, mediation training, negotiation training, team coaching, etc. The combined use of training coaching also provides a variety of venues to appeal to the variety of ways people learn and change.

Summary

Conflict coaching provides people with an individualized approach to dispute and conflict management and achieves a number of important objectives. Among other things, conflict coaching provides a practical and results-oriented forum for making changes in how people interact with others when and before conflict arises. This process not only helps people whose effectiveness and work performance suffer due to the lack of conflict competence. Besides the personal and professional gains, modelling effective conflict management has an important impact on other staff and the organization itself. Clients of course, also benefit from organizations whose staff are conflict competent and whose culture conveys this attribute.

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