

# “Conflict Management Coaching in the Workplace”

Speaker: Cinnie Noble, C.M., BSW, LL.B., LL.M. (ADR), C.Med

By Rachel Frydman, Q.Med



Cinnie Noble, C.M., BSW,  
LL.B., LL.M. (ADR)

- a chartered mediator (C.Med) and professional certified coach (PCC) - is the founder of CINERGY Coaching. She is the author of two coaching books 'Conflict Management Coaching: The CINERGY Model' and 'Conflict Mastery: Questions To Guide You'. [www.cinergycoaching.com](http://www.cinergycoaching.com)

The ADR Institute of Ontario (ADRIO) was fortunate to welcome back Cinnie Noble, C.M., LL.B., LL.M. (ADR), C.Med, to speak to a group of interested members on May 12, 2015. Her talk on *Conflict Management Coaching in the Workplace* provided concrete information on an emerging field that can be used separately or in tandem with workplace mediations.

Cinnie is a pioneer of the process called conflict management coaching (also known as conflict coaching). She developed her model in 1999, in part, as a response to the fact that workplace (and other) interpersonal disputes are “not always or necessarily about issues”. Rather, it is often about how people interact with each other that triggers conflict for them. She also identified the gap in the ADR field with respect to the provision of one-on-one work for people who want to manage their disputes independently – with increased skill and confidence.

## Basic Coaching Framework

A basic framework for professional coaching starts with the client identifying his or her goal. By then

and focus on ways to achieve their objectives. Cinnie discovered through her research and development of a coaching model - specific to conflict - that a structured framework functions well to facilitate the process.

Through training as a coach and her subsequent experience Cinnie became increasingly aware of the importance of the coach-client relationship, of the core competencies required as a coach, and of the guiding principles of coaching. A main principle is about relying on self-determination when assisting clients to develop and strengthen their personal and professional best.

For ADR practitioners learning about coaching it is easy to relate to the common phrases used by Cinnie and heard throughout mediation training such as self-determination, meet the client where they are, the client is the “expert.” This lends to the evolution of a natural marriage between mediation and coaching.

## Types of Cases

Conflict management coaching can be implemented at any point before, during, or after conflict. In her presentation Cinnie shared common scenarios when conflict management coaching is applied within these timeframes. For instance, in anticipation of conflict – before an unnecessary evolution of it – she referred to situations in which a client expects to get pushback and negative reactions to the delivery of difficult messages. Cinnie shared a pertinent example of when managers are reticent to give performance reviews - anticipat-

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using a process of inquiry and other methods, coaches help clients to increase their level of awareness, shift their perspectives

ing negative reactions from certain employees. She once encountered an employer who had been putting these conversations off for an entire year, evidently breaking company policy. Coaching during a conflict helps the client to consider how the conflict can be better managed rather than letting it escalate. And though many organizations do not offer the option of coaching after a conflict (including post mediation), Cinnie finds that there is much value for clients being coached in this time frame to build resilience and consider what to do differently in the future if the same sort of situation arises.

### Conflict Cycles

When Cinnie created her coaching model she based it partially on the idea that we all tend to follow a pattern when faced with conflict. This pattern can be thought of as a merry-go-round due to its cyclical nature. A few components of the pattern include the trigger point, the reaction, and the assumptions made about the other person's motive. Among other things, the model aims to heighten clients' reflections and bring awareness of their habitual pattern depicted in the merry-go-round. As a consequence of analyzing their patterns and the coaching they experience clients ultimately learn new ways of coping and engaging in conflict. Incidentally, Cinnie's model is substantiated by some aspects of neuroscience. She explained that when triggered by a conflict, the part of the brain that is activated is the amygdala, responsible for regulating emotions. Coaching people to be better able to manage conflict involves helping them shift from reaction (limbic area) to reflection (pre-frontal cortex) which ultimately facilitates a more rational analysis and choice of action.

### The Coaching Process

Dispute specific coaching may take four to eight sessions to complete (approximately an hour for each session) and, according to Cinnie, increased awareness also occurs for the client in between sessions due to seeds planted during coaching. Trained coaches use a range of skills, including powerful questions that engender new perspectives about each person's contribution to the conflict, including his or her own. Some approaches to this questioning include the use of metaphors and a strengths-based perspective to the typically negative topic of conflict. An example of this would be exploring how a client's 'Achilles Heel' in a conflict actually represents a strength instead of a vulnerability.

Just as different clients have different patterns of behaviour in conflict, the coach-approach is tailored to the individual. For instance, for clients who are artistic or otherwise visual and having difficulty identifying what is creating an impasse for him or her, Cinnie may suggest they draw what the block looks like.

Some clients are resistant to coaching and may experience a blow to their self-esteem and morale when referred by their managers. The coach works with the client, when this occurs, to establish rapport and co-create a way forward that considers the

benefits of the process. The coach-approach is developmental rather than remedial and educating those who refer employees to coaching is important to maintain this approach. The field of coaching has grown

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exponentially since the 1990s, however, and it is increasingly common for leaders to seek out coaching, and accordingly, they also make more appropriate referrals.

### Coaching in Mediation

For workplace mediations, Cinnie finds that coaching each party individually prior to the joint meeting is essential. During these coaching sessions (Cinnie recommends two or three), each party is individually coached so that they become active participants in the mediation. In this regard, among other things, she usually conducts the 'merry-go-round' exercise referred to above and focuses each party to identify three of the most important messages they want the other party to hear during the mediation. Preparatory sessions of this nature are a perfect example of how Cinnie uses her coaching expertise in the field of mediation. 🌱

