

THE EXPANSIVE GROWTH OF CONFLICT COACHING

by Cinnie Noble, LL.B., LL.M.(ADR)

Conflict coaching, also known as conflict management coaching, has steadily emerged, since the late 90s, in the fields of professional coaching and ADR. Private and public sector organizations in Canada, the U.S., Australia, Ireland, the U.K., Turkey, Hong Kong and others have increasingly embraced this process that may be used in tandem with mediation and other ADR techniques. This coaching specialty is also used on an individualized basis for clients who choose to manage their disputes independently or to strengthen their conflict competence in general. This article will discuss the growth of conflict management coaching, particularly in Canada, and with reference to this writer's experience within the U.S. federal government.

Canada

In 2003, the *Public Service Modernization Act* was passed in Canada and presaged new ways to foster a culture of collaboration and conflict competence within the federal government.

Amongst its many innovative approaches, a significant and especially pertinent provision (s.207) of this statute requires the most senior public servants in each core department to establish an *Informal Conflict Management System* (ICMS). A directive at the time confirmed the intention to also have the departments move towards prevention and better management of conflict by appointing ICMS officers to report to each agency's head.

The Act goes further by requiring every department to establish a consultation committee consisting of representatives of the deputy head and the bargaining agents. This is for the purpose of exchanging information and obtaining views and advice on workplace issues – and to co-develop improvements they identify.¹ Table 1 below contains the statute's relevant provisions.

Table 1

The Public Service Modernization Act's Conflict Management System Related Sections

¹ J. Lynch (November 2004), "Innovations in Integrated Conflict Management System: Dispute Resolution Models", <http://www.mediate.com/articles/systemsedit5.cfm>

Part 1: Labour Relations

Consultation Committees and Co-Development

8. Each deputy head must, in consultation with the bargaining agents representing employees in the portion of the federal public administration for which he or she is deputy head, establish a consultation committee consisting of representatives of the deputy head and the bargaining agents for the purpose of exchanging information and obtaining views and advice on issues relating to the workplace that affect those employees.

9. 'Co-development of workplace improvements' means the consultation between the parties on workplace issues and their participation in the identification of workplace problems and the development and analysis of solutions to those problems with a view to adopting mutually agreed to solutions.

10. The employer and a bargaining agent, or a deputy head and a bargaining agent, may engage in co-development of workplace improvements.

Conflict Management

Informal conflict management system

207. Subject to any policies established by the employer or any directives issued by it, every deputy head in the core public administration must, in consultation with bargaining agents representing employees in the portion of the core public administration for which he or she is deputy head, establish an informal conflict management system and inform the employees in that portion of its availability.

By specifying a systems approach in s. 207- and the involvement of employee representatives in its development - Canada has taken world leadership in the evolution of organizational conflict management.

Early after the Act's inception and until today, ADR offices exist in various formats throughout most Canadian federal government departments and agencies. Conflict management coaching forms an integral service provided by their in-house staff and external contractors, as required.

According to Paul Beaudry, Director, Office of Workplace Conflict Management, Human Resources Branch, Public Service and Procurement Canada and Co-chair of the Federal Informal Conflict Management System Network, conflict management coaching is one of the services that most Agencies across the Canadian federal Government offer to staff within their statute mandated Informal Conflict Management Systems. Mr. Beaudry

indicates there has been a steady growth of this process and in a range of contexts since the early 2000's when coaching was first introduced.

Common and continuing usage includes helping staff manage their interpersonal disputes independently or as part of the mediation process to prepare parties to effectively and actively participate. He adds that coaching and coach approaches are generally used to assist people with their conflict related problem solving, to gain tools to be more conflict competent, to consider their options and to choose the appropriate option.

United States

Created as a result of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the Transportation Security Administration – TSA – (a division of Homeland Security) launched an Integrated Conflict Management System (ICMS). It was a key initiative of a comprehensive project to develop a “Model Workplace Program”. By implementing an ICMS, TSA aimed, among other things, to provide its employees with a common language and a commitment to cooperative problem solving. This program, while in effect, built skills for all employees; it built structures (“the places and ways to raise issues and concerns”); and it built support through leadership, coordination and evaluation.

Within this ICMS, a conflict management coaching program was created in 2004 to provide one-on-one coaching for airport screeners. This was the first known conflict management coaching program designed and integrated into an ICMS as part of the U.S. federal government. Due to many changes within the organization this initiative was not sustained. However, as long as it existed, the inclusion of the conflict management coaching program formed an effective and integral part of an integrated systems approach to managing workplace disputes before, during and after they arise.²

The Future of Conflict Coaching

All signs point to the growing use of conflict management coaching independent of and as part of mediation and other ADR practices in both private and public sector organizations. In this regard, there has been, in general, increasing evidence within workplaces that leadership coaching forms part of organizational efforts made to strengthen leaders’ conflict management skills. In fact, a relatively recent executive coaching survey of

² C Noble, S. Slosberg & S. Becker (October 2009), “Conflict Management Coaching at the Transportation Security Administration”, <http://www.mediate.com/articles/nobleC11.cfm>; M. Rawlings (January 2006), “Peer Conflict Coaching at the Transportation Security Administration”, <http://www.mediate.com//articles/rawlingsM1.cfm>

CEOs indicated that 43% noted conflict management as the highest area of concern for their further development.³

Research about the qualitative and quantitative criteria for measuring the uses, effectiveness and applications of conflict management coaching will add to its credibility and growth. Some previously suggested areas ripe to be assessed include:

- A comparison of outcomes, user satisfaction and other variables based on using a third-party intervention and a one-on-one process for helping people manage their conflicts and disputes.
- A comparison of the sustainability of learning and skills gained in conflict management training, measured with and without the addition of individualized coaching after the workshop.
- The impact of pre-mediation conflict management coaching by separate coaches for each party, considering variables such as outcome of the mediation, level of participation, durability of conflict management skills gained, process satisfaction, outcome satisfaction, the parties' confidence and other factors.
- How the attendance of coaches during mediation may affect factors such as the level and effectiveness of disputing parties' participation, the outcome of mediation, process satisfaction, what parties learn and sustain regarding conflict management, their confidence and other variables.
- The types of intervention that are best suited considering the neurobiology of conflict escalation and de-escalation, as well as neuroscience principles that have an impact on coaching individuals through their interpersonal conflicts and disputes.
- Proficiencies that inform standards of practice for pertinent training.
- Cultural factors to consider when offering and providing conflict management coaching.
- Ways to inspire the use of conflict management coaching in organizations as a proactive mechanism to help people engage more effectively in conflict.
- How conflict management coaching is applied in private and public sector organizations and what the critical success factors are.⁴

³ D. Larker, S. Miles, B. Tayan & M. Gutman, "2013 Executive Coaching Survey", <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/sites/gsb/files/publication-pdf/cgri-survey-2013-executive-coaching.pdf>

⁴ C. Noble (2012), *Conflict Management Coaching: The CINERGY™ Model*, pp.235-236 (<http://tinyurl.com/CMCbookAmazon>)

In this regard, the proposed research agenda for collaborative research across federal government agencies in the U.S. – being presented by Tricia Jones, Ph.D. – will prove invaluable.

On a personal note, in my practice as a certified coach for private and public sector organizations, there has been a substantial increase in the number of lawyers, doctors, executives, HR professionals and others seeking conflict management coaching for their own benefit. A common thrust among those seeking leadership coaching is to develop more mindful and less stressful ways of doing work that requires them to be constantly in the face of conflict – draining them of their energy and inner resources. Similarly, along with mediators and others who work with people in conflict, lawyers are increasingly being trained in conflict management coaching, with the goal of more effectively coaching their clients to engage in the legal system and more particularly, mediation and collaborative processes.

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