

## **IT DOESN'T HAVE TO HURT: LEARNING FROM CONFLICT**

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Interpersonal conflict is an inevitable part of our lives and many of us struggle with “sticky situations” that arise, with our clients, colleagues and others. Our learning about what to do and not to do when it comes to conflict, began as young children. Years and layers of experiences later, many of us will admit that we are not as adept in this area, as we would like to be.

Given its many complexities and no rule book to turn to, it is no wonder that many people are confounded about how to effectively manage conflict. The importance of being conflict competent as coaches cannot however, be overstated. This is not only for managing our own conflict, but also for coaching our clients about their conflicts. This article is about some things to consider in your efforts to manage sticky situations, with clients or others.

### **Types of Sticky Situations**

Various types of conflict that a number of coaches have identified to this writer are when:

- \* coaches determine clients are not coachable, or for other reasons decide to terminate their relationship
- \* clients express dissatisfaction with their progress and blame their coaches
- \* coaches realize there is a conflict of interest
- \* clients “fire” you and may even threaten a lawsuit or other action
- \* clients do not pay their accounts at all, or on time
- \* clients are habitually late for appointments, or cancel on short notice
- \* clients demonstrate words and actions that challenge the coaches’ values

### **Managing Sticky Situations**

Mastering conflict, so that it doesn’t master us, requires introspective work, of the nature that we apply as coaches. The language in the conflict management field is about conflict engagement and viewing conflict as an opportunity to grow, to strengthen relationships and to find mutually satisfactory resolutions. Here are five suggestions about ways to enhance your skills for managing conflict:

### ***1. Vent or We'll Invent***

We all know that it is important to vent, when we are faced with a challenge in our lives. But, the suggestion is not about just any venting. Whether it is to a coach, colleague, friend or family member, it is important to share what happened, from our perspective. It is equally important to consider and articulate what “the other person’s” version may be, about what occurred. Being absolutely honest and by considering our contribution, is the piece that often goes missing. Without that piece, the story can easily become one of blame, denial and a tendency to become entrenched in our positions.

### ***2. Coach the “Gap”***

Whether we receive coaching or do self-coaching, reflective work is important, whenever we realize our rule book on conflict is missing a few pages. Using a coach approach, it helps after venting, to conduct a “gap” analysis about the situation, such as:

- \* What is the outcome I want here – both in result and how I want to respond?
- \* What action steps will help me reach my outcome?
- \* What will get in the way of me taking those steps?
- \* How will I overcome those challenges?

Self-reflective work in conflict coaching involves among other things, examining our patterns of reactions, our “hot buttons” and gaining insights into what perpetuates them. For instance, it is usual that we perceive a value is being undermined when someone pushes our hot buttons. Identifying that value, often provides an important insight, as does exploring our assumptions. It is not sufficient to identify only our own “hot buttons”, though. It is necessary to consider what we may have said or done to provoke “the other person’s” values. To identify your hottest buttons, go to: <http://www.conflictdynamics.org/cdp/hotbuttons/index.php>.

### ***3. Choose the Action***

In keeping with the theme that interpersonal conflict is often best addressed in collaborative ways, consider a range of options to manage the situation, that will not only meet your needs. Consider also, what action may work for “the other person”. If the outcome desired is to resolve matters and make amends, there are various ways to do so. This typically includes having a direct or telephone conversation with “the other person”. Writing letters and emails are more subject to misinterpretation, but do-able, if well prepared.

Consider also mediation, a confidential and voluntary process, in which a neutral person facilitates a dialogue between you and “the other person”. Mediators typically take people through a process of having them each convey their side of the story, what the

issues are, what both want and why, and what options there are for a mutually agreeable resolution. Sound familiar? Mediators come from a range of backgrounds and their fees are variable. Payment of the mediator's costs, the venue (can be done by telephone or online) and choosing the practitioner, are all matters to consider.

#### ***4. Preparing for the Action***

It goes without saying that the opportunity to prepare for and practice the interaction, facilitates the journey to the desired outcome.

Some suggested questions to consider are:

- \* Having previously considered what outcome I want, what may “the other person” want?
- \* What may be most important to “the other person” about this situation?
- \* What is the message I want to convey?
- \* What tone do I want to set?
- \* What may “the other person” want to tell me?
- \* What am I most concerned about? How will I manage that or those things?
- \* What else do I need to be prepared for?

A few books on having challenging conversations are at the end of this article.

#### ***5. Note the Lesson and Grow From It***

One of the ways to enhance our conflict management skills, is to note the lesson learned in sticky situations and add it to our rule books. Addressing sticky situations often reminds us that we are not as conflict competent as we want to be. We may want specific coaching on our conflict management goals, or to undertake training or some self-work about how to engage more effectively in conflict. For developing coaches' skills and for use with our clients in conflict, some useful assessment tools pertaining to conflict styles and responses are at the end of this article.

### **Summary**

Sticky situations can be complicated and fraught with challenges, to say the least. However, unbundling them by increasing our self-awareness and being intentional about enhancing our conflict management skills is the entrance to the important path that leads to increased conflict competence. Developing this type of competence is necessary to not only effectively engage in conflict, as coaches. Conflict mastery helps strengthen our foundation that enables skillful coaching of our clients with their sticky situations.

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*Some books on having challenging conversations:*

- **Crucial Conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high** (2002), K. Patterson, J. Grenny, R. McMillan & A. Switzler, McGraw-Hill
- **Fierce Conversations** (2002), S. Scott, Penguin USA
- **Difficult Conversations: How to discuss what matters most** (1999), D. Stone, B. Patton & S. Heen, Penguin Putnam Inc.

*Some assessment tools on conflict styles and responses:*

- Conflict Dynamics Profile® - [www.conflictdynamics.org](http://www.conflictdynamics.org)
- Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument - [www.kilmann.com/conflict.html](http://www.kilmann.com/conflict.html)
- Dealing with Conflict Instrument - [www.hrdpress.com](http://www.hrdpress.com)
- Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory - [http://www.riverhousepress.com/Conflict\\_Style\\_Inventory.htm](http://www.riverhousepress.com/Conflict_Style_Inventory.htm)
- Intercultural Development Inventory - <http://www.intercultural.org/idi/idi.html>

*Other suggested reading:*

- **Hot Buttons** (2000), S. Evans & S. Suib Cohen, Cliff Street Books
- **The Joy of Conflict Resolution: Transforming victims, villains and heroes in the workplace and at home** (2004), G. Harper, New Society Publishers
- **Getting to Yes: Negotiating agreement without giving up** (1991), R. Fisher, B. Patton & W. Ury, Penguin
- **Getting Past No: Negotiating your way from confrontation to cooperation** (1991), W. Ury, Bantam Books
- **Loving What Is: Four questions that can change your life** (2002), B. Katie, Harmony
- **The Coach's Handbook: Exercises for resolving conflict in the workplace** (1999), T. Ursiny, Advantage Coaching and Training Inc.
- **The Coward's Guide to Conflict: Empowering solutions for those who would rather run than fight** (2003), T. Ursiny, Sourcebooks Inc.