

# Conflict coaching

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## **Introduction**

The use of conflict coaching, also known as conflict management coaching, is growing in Australia and around the globe. Conflict coaching models originated in the late 1990s in Canada and the USA and have been used in Australasia since about 2003.

## **What is conflict coaching?**

Conflict coaching is a confidential, one-on-one, model of conflict resolution which reviews a conflict and develops the client's awareness of self and ability to manage conflict. It is a powerful stand-alone tool which can also be used as an effective precursor to mediation in forums such as workplaces, families, business partnerships and collaborative practice. The coaching can focus on a particular dispute or situation that involves specific others, or on certain behaviours that an individual may wish to change to improve their own conflict competence.

## **How does it work?**

Conflict coaching uses a structured model which steps individuals through a self-reflective process whereby they tell their conflict story to a trained coach. The coach may also be a trained mediator. The coach guides the client through a series of steps to assist them with deep reflection, 'deconstruction' and 'disruption' of their narrative. The questions posed are designed to look beneath the client's surface reactions allowing them to gain a deeper understanding of their 'triggers', clarify their

needs and challenge their own perceptions and assumptions of the intentions of the person with whom they are in conflict. Both people are able to consider the 'other's' perspective and reflect on any possible contribution to the conflict or dispute that they may have made themselves.

Through this reflective process, conflict coaching enables the individual to re-evaluate their choices or options and approaches to their situation. The coach can then support the client in preparing the steps they may want to take to manage or resolve their dispute or change their approach to future conflict. The conflict coach does not provide advice, rather they manage the coaching process which is self-determinative for the client.

Cinnie Noble is the Canadian developer of the widely-used CINERGY® Conflict Management Coaching model and she explains clients' responses to the coaching saying that, "insights are those moments of clarity when something suddenly makes sense ... it's seeing the same old thing in a completely new way".

The coaching method is flexible and equally effective when delivered face-to-face, by phone or by Skype.

### **When is it used?**

Conflict coaching can be used in the workplace. It works well with a dysfunctional team or with individuals who are disengaged or in conflict. It is particularly effective as a first step in a workplace ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution) process. Where a workplace provides an opportunity for individuals to experience the power of conflict management coaching, it can be a powerful step to reconciliation of differences, resolution of disputes or as a tool to provide effective management of workplace interactions. In Australia, some organisations have instigated conflict coaching before a formal investigation is commenced. This can result in direct and indirect savings in time, costs and legal proceedings. It may be followed by mediation or facilitated conversation. This form of coaching has proven to be particularly effective in cases of deeply entrenched ongoing conflict where participants have become very positional and it is difficult to bring resolution by more conventional methods. It is also very helpful when used as an early intervention, before issues escalate.

If the coach is a trained mediator, they can effectively conduct the mediation where there are no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. When mediations follow conflict coaching the participants are more engaged, less adversarial and agreements made are generally more sustainable because of the focussed, structured preparation provided by the coaching.

Conflict coaching is effective in working with dysfunctional teams and in this approach individual coaching is followed by a whole of team facilitation resulting in a team agreement or charter that clarifies roles, sets behaviours and establishes strong communication.

The frequency, number and duration of sessions vary according to the environment and needs of the individual and / or organisation. One-off sessions have been found to be very effective however it is generally helpful for there to be more than one coaching session for complicated issues or deep set behaviour. Many organisations are adopting forms of conflict coaching such as The Australian Defence Force which established an effective accredited peer conflict coaching program in 2005 and offers the service to any member of the Defence force or civilian employees.

Conflict coaching is used effectively as part of a family dispute resolution process and is offered in some cases as a stand-alone service in this area.

Some applications of conflict coaching:

- Pre-mediation/facilitated discussion (family, workplace, business, partnership, elders etc.)
- Post-mediation
- Change management / adapting to workplace changes
- In collaborative practice
- Pre-conciliation
- In workplace, as first step for person to work out what they need or what action they want to take
- To consider options before a formal complaint is lodged in workplace
- Post-workplace incident or post-investigation in workplace

- As part of workplace assessment or team dynamics review
- Before return-to-work (if person off work) and for team members before person returns to work
- Preparation for performance review (manager and team member)
- Preparation for difficult negotiation
- Adapting to changes in personal relationships. family dynamics or circumstances
- For business partners, pre-strategic planning session
- For business partners, pre-exit planning discussions

## **Summary**

In summary, conflict management coaching is an effective and powerful conflict resolution tool used in a number of forums to bring about resolution of a variety of deep seated and destructive conflict. The coaching approach assists clients achieve insight and self-revelation. It can be stand alone or act as a precursor to further individual or group resolution methods. It is practical and effective and acts to empower the client and bring lasting results based on understanding the nature and causes of the conflict within themselves and the other person(s).

Conflict coaching training is delivered face-to-face in Australia and NZ by licensed ADR providers. Coaches can also gain accreditation through the certified providers.

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