

CONFLICT COACHING: A NEW ADR TECHNIQUE

BY CINNIE NOBLE: PUBLISHED IN THE ONTARIO BAR ASSOCIATIONS' ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION NEWSLETTER, VOLUME 17, NO.1, DECEMBER, 2008

Karen was promoted to a management position four months ago. In the past month, three staff members complained to her boss, saying Karen's micromanagement was stifling them and that she argues with them when they ask for more autonomy. The boss conveyed this to Karen who reacted strongly, pointing out that staffs' bad habits require her to "manage them tightly." Karen is concerned that her response to her boss may be career-limiting and she wonders what to do about this situation and her style of management.

James and Margarite separated a year ago and both are reluctant to hire lawyers because they fear the cost. Margarite read about collaborative family law and mediation, but she anticipates James will resist her efforts to move things along, even in these ways. Margarite may want to see a coach to explore these options and prepare her to communicate with James in a way he may best receive her suggestions.

Caroline is the CEO of a major retail store. She is about to enter into major negotiations with the competition about a possible merger. A skilled negotiator, Caroline knows a lot is at stake and, although she has had much experience to date, she finds herself inordinately concerned about the upcoming discussions. Caroline may want a coach to help her prepare for these negotiations.

Mediators reading the above scenarios will likely consider how mediation may benefit the parties. Coaches are likely to consider the advantages of coaching. The forum used, mediation or coaching, depends on several factors, including the preferences and objectives of the person seeking assistance. For instance, Karen may want help on how to structure a conversation with her boss to rectify matters. She may also want some coaching on how to improve her management style to avoid similar problems in the future. Margarite may want to see a coach to explore her options and to help prepare her to communicate with James in a way he may best receive her suggestions. Caroline may want a coach to help address her concerns and prepare for these negotiations.

Growth of Coaching

Since the early 1990s, there has been an exponential growth in the field of coaching and its range of categories, including executive, organizational, life, and business coaching. There also has been an increase in coaching specialties, ranging from career coaching to weight loss coaching to parent coaching, and so on. In the ADR field, conflict coaching is fast emerging as a specialized technique, and this article provides a perspective on some of its applications.

A Definition of Conflict Coaching

Conflict coaching is a one-on-one process for helping individuals improve their conflict understanding and skills, to manage conflict and disputes more effectively. This definition, and variations of it, are used to describe a technique with the fundamental objective of coaching people to better engage in their interpersonal conflicts in both their personal and professional lives.

Assisting individuals with their interpersonal conflicts is not a new concept. Indeed, one of the many roles of organizational ombudsmen is to assist staff members on a one-on-

one basis. In various ways others, such as union representatives, counsellors from employee assistance programs, managers, supervisors, and HR professionals, routinely assist individuals with conflict situations in the workplace. Similarly, therapists, psychologists and other human services professionals assist people with conflict in their personal and professional lives. The word “coaching” however, is being used by many professionals and practitioners in these various groups, although their practices may not necessarily fit within the definition of coaching according to one of the coaching field’s main organizations, the International Coach Federation (www.coachfederation.org).

The following is part of a general definition of coaching, as stated by the International Coach Federation:

Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. Coaching is an ongoing relationship which focuses on clients taking action toward the realization of their visions, goals or desires. Coaching uses a process of inquiry and personal discovery to build the client’s level of awareness and responsibility and provides the client with structure, support and feedback.

Unlike sports coaching, conflict coaching, as many other types of coaching, does not entail advising people what to do to improve their actions and reach their goals. Rather, one of the cornerstones of the field of coaching is self-determination and one of the main skills of trained coaches is the use of powerful questions that increase insights and awareness that help people, to help themselves.

Applications of Conflict Coaching

Currently, conflict coaching as a distinct technique appears to be growing mostly in workplaces as an additional option for employees and tool for mediators, whether or not there is an Integrated (Informal) Conflict Management System. This technique may be used instead of, or in tandem with, mediation and other ADR processes. In addition to helping individuals improve their conflict management skills in any context, some other applications of conflict coaching include:

- as a pre-mediation or pre-other ADR process to help individuals anticipate and prepare for any challenges and to effectively participate in the process;
- to prepare clients to actively and effectively participate in collaborative law meetings;
- as a post-mediation or post-other ADR process to help individuals with the aftermath of any unresolved matters and ways to manage ongoing interactions;
- to help managers, supervisors and others focus on aspects of their conflict conduct requiring improvement;
- to help people enhance their negotiation skills;

- as an integral part of conflict management training, to provide individualized ongoing assistance with participants' specific challenges; and,
- to facilitate self-reflective practice of conflict management professionals and others who work in any capacity, with people in conflict.

Summary

As an additional tool for ADR professionals, conflict coaching represents a multi-faceted process that is adaptable to the specific conflict management goals of the individuals who seek coaching. Although there are a number of similarities between some aspects of conflict coaching and mediation (and other ADR processes), there are a number of significant differences, besides the one-on-one nature of coaching. For instance, the types of goals an individual may bring to a coach are not necessarily about resolving issues. Objectives often include the desire to gain strategies for changing non-productive behaviours, or to manage situations without assistance of another person. While similarities also exist in some of the skills and steps used by both coaches and mediators, there are also differences that warrant appropriate training.

Creative ADR practitioners will undoubtedly develop more applications of the conflict coaching process. These may be used in any context in which people want individualized assistance to be able to engage in their interpersonal conflicts more effectively. Standards of practice will inevitably develop within our field in the foreseeable future and conflict coaching will increasingly establish its place in the ADR continuum.

Cinnie Noble, ACC, CM, LL.M. (ADR), is a lawyer-mediator and ICF certified coach who created the CINERGY® model of conflict coaching. She chairs the ACR Workplace Section's new Conflict Coaching Subcommittee and is co-chair of the ICF's Special Interest Group on Conflict Coaching.

CONFLICT COACHING: ADR FOR ONE

BY CINNIE NOBLE: ACRESOLUTION, THE QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE, SUMMER 2008

Since the early 1990s, there has been an exponential growth of the field of coaching and its range of categories, including organizational, leadership, life, and business coaching. There also has been an increase in coaching specialties ranging from career coaching to weight loss coaching to parent coaching, and so on. In the field of alternative dispute resolution (ADR), conflict coaching is fast emerging as a specialized technique, and this article provides a perspective on its growth.

The Definition of Conflict Coaching

Conflict coaching is a one-on-one process for helping individuals improve their conflict understanding and skills to manage conflict and disputes more effectively. This definition and variations of it are used to describe a technique with the fundamental objective of coaching people to better engage in interpersonal conflict, in their personal and professional lives.

Assisting individuals with their interpersonal conflicts is not a new concept. Indeed, one of the many roles of organizational ombudsmen is to assist staff members on a one-on-one basis. In various ways, others, such as union representatives, counselors from employee assistance programs, managers, supervisors, and HR professionals, routinely assist individuals with conflict situations in the workplace, as well. However, the term “conflict coaching” is commonly used to describe many forms of assistance, the bases of which are not necessarily consistent with the premise contained in the following general definition of coaching, according to one of the major international coaching associations, the International Coach Federation (ICF, www.coachfederation.org):

Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. Coaching is an ongoing relationship which focuses on clients taking action toward the realization of their visions, goals or desires. Coaching uses a process of inquiry and personal discovery to build the client's level of awareness and responsibility and provides the client with structure, support and feedback. The coaching process helps clients both define and achieve professional and personal goals faster and with more ease than would be possible otherwise.

It is anticipated that as conflict coaching increasingly develops as a distinct mechanism in the ADR field, one of the challenges will include clarifying what constitutes conflict coaching and related matters regarding its definition, premise, and scope.

Why Conflict Coaching Is Emerging as a Distinct ADR Mechanism

One reason for the growth of conflict coaching is that mediation is not always a suitable forum for addressing interpersonal disputes. Not everyone wants to participate in third party processes and in some cases, disputants do not appear for scheduled meetings, or one or more disputants is not satisfied with the outcome. Conflict coaching provides a different type of assistance that considers this and the different reasons people may prefer individualized help. For instance, objectives may include: venting concerns to a non-judgmental person and considering whether to do anything about the situation; preparing for a challenging conversation; or working toward shifting destructive

responses to certain “hot buttons,” and so on. The types of goals are limitless and often reflect the desire to find ways to prevent or manage conflict situations on their own, by gaining confidence and competence to do so.

A related reason inspiring the growth of conflict coaching is the need for more processes to address the high cost, whether financial or otherwise, of conflict in organizations. Even when effective conflict management is a competency, there appears to be a paucity of ways for leaders and others to develop the related skills. Therefore, conflict coaching is being used increasingly to develop those skills. Relatively few organizations have internal conflict management systems. Where there are systems, however, including where they are statutorily required (e.g. Canada’s federal government), conflict coaching has become one of the options that provides a one-on-one service. With or without a system, ADR practitioners have come to realize and fill the existing gap for an individualized process where there are no ombuds or others to assist.

Another reason for the emergence of conflict coaching relates to the aforementioned growth of the field of coaching and its wide usage in organizations and other contexts. The ICF and the International Association of Coaching (IAC, www.certifiedcoach.org), the other international coaching organization, work to advance, support, and preserve the integrity of the coaching profession. They do so by, among other things, promulgating standards and competencies that lend visibility and credibility to coaching. These efforts and the continuing expansion of the field of coaching help to lend legitimacy to the concept of conflict coaching.

Applications of Conflict Coaching

In addition to helping individuals improve their conflict management skills in any context, another application of conflict coaching is as a pre-mediation process to help individuals prepare to effectively participate in the process. Preparing parties to participate in collaborative law meetings is a similar application. Conflict coaching also may be used as a post-mediation process to help individuals with the aftermath of unresolved matters and feelings. It even may help them focus on the conflict conduct requiring improvement as identified in the mediation. In addition, conflict coaching may be used as an integral part of conflict management training to provide ongoing assistance with the application of participants’ learning.

Creative ADR practitioners will undoubtedly develop more and more applications of a process that fits into any context in which individuals want one-on-one assistance to improve confidence and competence for managing conflict.

Challenges Regarding the Growth of Conflict Coaching

It is interesting and exciting to be part of the growth of conflict coaching and, from the author’s perspective, there are a number of possible challenges ahead to be able to successfully integrate “ADR for one” into the range of conflict management skills and options. Conflict coaching has increasingly become a subject of articles and presentations at ACR and has led to discussions about the need to communicate more and find ways to establish and legitimize conflict coaching as an ADR technique. On the one hand, it is fortunate that the conflict resolution field continues to expand and provide a broader range of service. On the other hand, the credibility of the process will be questioned if we do not address the following considerations.

With the emergence of the concept of coaching, a significant number of people are now attaching the term conflict coaching to their one-on-one interventions. Indeed, some

practitioners report they have been providing individual assistance to people in conflict for many years. What has become increasingly evident is that it appears that many things are being called coaching that may not comply with the coaching field's definition and may actually be more consistent with mentoring or consulting. In addition to signaling a need to clarify semantics, the terminology also indicates that there are differing perspectives on what actually constitutes 'conflict coaching.' A further challenge in this regard, as with mediation, is the development of various models of conflict coaching. Although 'one size does not fit all,' there are likely to be some disparate, but not insurmountable, views to reconcile, as the ADR field embarks on dialogue about standards of practice.

Looking again at the coaching world, the International Coach Federation established a rigorous accreditation process for coaching schools, practitioners, and trainers, who are all required to meet extensive requirements and competencies. While there are similarities between some ADR processes and principles and those of coaching, differences exist as well. Hopefully, our community will soon take a page from the field of coaching to develop standards of practice and competencies, which will help ensure that conflict coaching finds its place within the ADR spectrum in a way that also provides integrity and legitimacy for practitioners and consumers alike.

The idea of "ADR for one" has been around in our field in various forms for many years. As conflict coaching models develop and more and more people become or call themselves coaches, it is expected that there will be a number of challenges and competing interests to consider. In summary, there are times that the above considerations may not matter, since the intention of those providing individualized assistance is undoubtedly to help people gain increased skill and ability to engage more effectively in conflict. Most times though, it really matters that our community pulls together to more formally address the various challenges and to work toward building a solid and credible foundation for conflict coaching as a process, one that we in the field will stand behind, with confidence. I look forward to and welcome this dialogue.

Cinnie Noble, ACC, CM, LL.M. (ADR), is a lawyer-mediator and ICF certified coach who created the CINERGY® model of conflict coaching. She chairs the ACR Workplace Section's new Conflict Coaching Subcommittee and is co-chair of the ICF's Special Interest Group on Conflict Coaching.

CONFLICT COACHING: TABLE FOR TWO

BY CINNIE NOBLE: WORKPLACE SECTION NEWS, AUGUST 25, 2008; VOLUME 3, NUMBER 3

Karen was promoted to a management position four months ago. In the past month, three staff members complained to her boss, saying Karen's micromanagement was stifling them and that she argues with them when they ask for more autonomy. The boss conveyed this to Karen who reacted strongly, pointing out various bad habits the staff demonstrates that require her to "manage them tightly." Karen is concerned that her response to her boss may be career-limiting and she wonders what to do about this situation.

George and Luis are co-workers who do not get along well. Things have been worsening between them in the past few weeks and George realizes the huge impact the tension is having on him. He dreads going to work and is not sure what to do about this situation.

Brian and Janice both wanted to head up the new project so their boss appointed them as co-leaders. Having to share the lead has resulted in tension between them. Janice hoped they would work out their differences to make the project successful but they are now openly arguing and their colleagues are beginning to take sides. Brian does not want to go to the boss about this and is thinking about his options.

Mediators reading the above scenarios will likely consider how mediation may benefit the parties. Coaches are likely to consider the advantages of coaching. The forum used, mediation or coaching, depends on several factors, including the preferences and objectives of the person seeking assistance. For instance, Karen may want help on how to structure a conversation with her boss to rectify matters. She may also want some coaching on how to improve her management style to avoid similar problems in the future. George may want to explore options on how to handle his relationship with Luis. Brian and/or Janice may individually seek assistance about the best approach to take with the other, to improve things between them. Mediation may be employed at the first instance, or after one or more of the people in each scenario seeks coaching, or not at all.

The Development of Conflict Coaching

In the ADR field, ombudspeople are the forerunners of providing one-on-one assistance for interpersonal workplace conflict. In 1990, Mary Rowe, a well-known Ombudsperson for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wrote about the concept in her article "Helping People Help Themselves: An Option for Complaint Handling" (Negotiation Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2). Although from different perspectives, union representatives, managers, and HR professionals all provide forms of coaching. More recently, conflict coaching has grown as a distinct technique in the ADR spectrum of conflict management tools and its growth is notable. Conflict coaching is a one-on-one process for helping individuals improve their understanding and skills to be able to manage conflict more effectively. Conflict coaching is an increasingly popular technique for a number of reasons. Not everyone wants to address their interpersonal workplace conflict and disputes in a third party process with the other person(s) involved. In fact, many people in conflict seek coaching to gain competence and confidence to manage current and future disputes on their own. Conflict coaching is also effective as a pre-mediation technique to prepare for the joint party session and as a post-mediation technique to work on the behaviors that parties realize may have conflict. Conflict coaching is also

effective as part of conflict management training and for self development purposes for mediators and others, who work with people in conflict.

The International Coach Federation

As conflict coaching further evolves, a range of conflict coaching models are likely to emerge. According to the International Coach Federation (www.coachfederation.org), major premises of current models are those that acknowledge self determination and self-discovery and employ a coaching framework that supports such discovery. Coaching helps people clarify their objectives and desired outcomes, assists them in identifying the steps required to reach their goals, and prepares them to anticipate and overcome the challenges in doing so.

In the process of assisting _coachees_ develop a concrete plan to achieve their goals, trained conflict coaches help individuals analyze how they engage in disputes. Coachees gain insights regarding behaviors that preclude them from interacting more effectively and in ways that align with their objectives. Coaching techniques such as reflective questioning help increase self-awareness and inspire different perspectives about the specific conflict situation and the related relationship dynamic.

Back to the Scenarios

Considering the previous scenario about Karen, if she seeks coaching, she may ask the coach to first help her prepare for a conversation with her boss in which she apologizes for her reaction and lets him know she intends to work on shifting her micromanagement style. In keeping with this goal, Karen's coaching may then concentrate on examining her style of management.

Among other possible approaches to help Karen reach her objectives, the coach may encourage Karen to reflect on the impact of her style on her staff and to consider what other styles she may try that will still meet her needs, as well as theirs. With coaching, Karen may also try out the new styles of managing indentified and/or she may request help to consider ways to best engage her staff in a discussion about their mutual expectations. These are just some examples of what Karen might accomplish in coaching.

Summary

Although there are a number of similar principles between conflict coaching and mediation, it is more than the number of people at the table that distinguishes them. For instance, the types of goals an individual may bring to the "Table for Two" with a coach are not necessarily about resolving issues. Oftentimes, coaching objectives include the desire to gain strategies for changing non-productive behaviors. Conflict coaching represents a multifaceted process that is adaptable to individual specific conflict management goals and the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to reach them.

As conflict coaching is quickly gaining strength as a distinct and effective ADR mechanism, it is increasingly important that the field comes together to dialogue on how this technique fits within the spectrum of options that help people in conflict.

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