

Coaching for conflict management

The mediation process benefits if participants understand and manage the elements of conflict they are experiencing.

Report by **Patrick Wedge**.



From time to time we have a conflict within ourselves or with another person, or even a group of people.

Mostly we are able to deal with this conflict ourselves, finding a suitable resolution, enabling us to move on with our lives. Sometimes, however, the conflict is not resolved, which leaves us at risk of not being able to move forward.

Dispute dynamics

People who interact when they are in dispute may be more focused on arguing rather than solving the problem of their relationship. They may not be interested in resolving the dispute, preferring to 'see you in court'.

They are invariably undergoing a process of grieving, frustration, etc. and experiencing some or all of the following emotions – shock, denial bargaining, despair and disorganisation, acceptance and reorganisation.¹ The order may vary with each individual. Unfortunately, without outside help they may get 'stuck' in this situation and may not be able to move on to looking for a solution.

People may focus on minor details of the issues that they are in dispute over, finding fault with the other party, highlighting past occasions where the other party has acted in a way that they do not like etc. rather than discussing how the dispute can be resolved. In life relationships, they can end up acting destructively towards one another.² In other words, they often fail to be aware of the dynamics of the conflict and how they are managing that dispute.

Consequently, people may come to the mediation room still not completely solution focussed, which could detract from the outcome of the mediation. Without reflecting on the competence of the mediator, they may miss the opportunity to help parties progress as, during mediation, they only see a slice from a day in their journey towards resolution.³

Parties may put on their best behaviour for the mediation session. For instance, one person told me during Intake that, notwithstanding the other party's aggressive and otherwise bad demeanour, they were

confident that in the presence of a third party the other party would behave appropriately.

Conflict management coaching

One way of assisting people improve their management of the conflict is for them to be coached.⁴ Conflict management coaching helps clients improve the way they handle their conflict to help them achieve their goals about the conflict.

One model of conflict management coaching is the CINERGY coaching model, the model I follow for coaching clients. The CINERGY model⁵ is a one-on-one, seven-stage process which enables the client to:

- prepare for the mediation
- prepare for challenging conversations
- prevent conflict from unnecessarily escalating
- shift unproductive conflict reactions to constructive responses
- manage their adverse reactions to conflict.

Coaches facilitate an informal conversation with the clients and support, encourage and challenge them to optimise their potential. They employ a structured model using reflective questions and other techniques to help individuals to:

- clarify and achieve their goals in managing the conflict
- develop insights into the dynamics of their particular conflicts
- consider the perspective of the other person or persons involved in the conflict
- explore options and make informed choices about how to manage the conflict
- develop practical skills to implement workable and sustainable conflict strategies
- consider and overcome any possible challenge to reaching their goals.

Conflict management coaching is designed to help people shift their thinking, perspectives and behaviour, either on a specific dispute or generally. It is about self-empowering the person in dealing with their conflicts. As people generally are unable to change other people's behaviour, coaching assists them to work out

strategies that they can use in dealing with the person with whom they are in dispute.

Coaching isn't necessarily limited to just one session. Depending on client needs, such as their emotional situation and time limitations – for example, work commitments – multiple sessions may be more appropriate. Having more than one session allows the client to review their goals and readjust them in the light of their experience in implementing their earlier strategies.

Conflict management coaching can be useful in workplace disputes, business dealings, family disputes and other areas where there are interpersonal relationships. It may be a step on the way to a mediation or a stand-alone activity to assist a person generally gain more competence in managing their conflicts.

In the context of mediations, the parties that I have coached have responded favourably to the process, indicating to me that they have gained better insights into the dynamics of their conflict. A client, after one session, was enthusiastic about her discoveries and had formed new goals in managing her conflict.

Conflict management coaching is another option for alternative dispute resolution practitioners to have in their toolkit for use by clients working toward resolving their conflict.

It is not for everyone and it must be stated that such coaching is not therapy, nor is it counselling. If those interventions are required, the client should be referred to an appropriately qualified professional.

This article appears courtesy of the Queensland Law Society Alternative Dispute Resolution Committee. Patrick Wedge is a mediator and conflict management coach at the Conflict Resolution Centre. See patrickwedge.com and conflictresolutioncentre.com.au.

Notes

¹ L Boule and M Nestic, *Mediator Skills and techniques: Triangle of Influence* (Bloomsbury Professional) p53.

² L Fisher and M Brandon, *Mediating with Families* (3rd ed., Law Book Co 2012) p77.

³ S Marsh, adr.com/adr4/cycle1.htm.

⁴ L Boule and M Nestic, *Mediator Skills and techniques: Triangle of Influence* (Bloomsbury Professional) p84.

⁵ C Noble, *Conflict Management Coaching The Cinergy Model* (2012 Cinergy Coaching) p111.