

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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Conflict Coaching

By Ross Brinkert

Introduction

"ADR Plus One" suggests that the alternative dispute resolution field can expand its boundaries and potency by incorporating one or more types of coaching. Coaching is a powerful concept that has roots in this nation's love of sports. In recent years, coaching has been used to make sense of a variety of different supportive relationships. Conflict coaching is one type of coaching relationship. It can be used in anticipation of an interpersonal conflict or to make a thorough assessment of a conflict that has already occurred. Conflict coaching fosters an individual's clarity for how a conflict shapes.

Temple University's campus alternative dispute resolution organization, the Conflict Education Resource Team (CERT), developed and implemented a conflict-coaching model in 1996. The initiative came after CERT recognized that their mediation services were underutilized by the campus community. Coaching proved to be a service especially suited to conflict cases where only one party was seeking CERT's assistance.

The aim of this paper is to help the reader understand the general appeal of coaching. I will provide an overview of the basic types of coaching and conflict coaching, explore the conflict styles model of conflict coaching and identify some new opportunities for conflict coaching.

While reading this paper, it is important to note the assumptions that infuse my approach conflict models. These assumptions may be valuable for those in the role of coach or participant. My first assumption is that a particular model can be understood as one of many valid models. This is to say that one model does not necessarily represent reality better than another model. Perhaps a more important issue is whether a particular model is more or less meaningful than another at a particular point in time. It may be well the case that so-called competing models are equally meaningful. It may also be the case that they are too different to make a comparison.

My second assumption is that a model's strengths and weaknesses are related to the system to which it is applied. A particular model means different things when used by different people in different contexts. Therefore, strengths and weaknesses are best assessed by considering

specific applications rather than attempting a universal assessment.

My third assumption is that people live with uncertainty. The researcher, coach and participant all work without the benefit of complete information. This means it is wise to act with humility. It is also wise not to judge too harshly the past actions of others or ourselves since retrospect provides a degree of certainty that we rarely, if ever, experience in the present moment.

My fourth assumption is that despite uncertainty, meaning and action are important. An uncertain world allows us to justify either meaninglessness or meaningfulness. Most would agree that the latter makes for more attractive lives and relationships. It also makes us more likely to act with intention. Action is important because it helps construct the environment we act into. Acting may mean making a leap and exploring a model even though we might later apply another.

My final assumption is that it is useful to act with curiosity. Many people find that a curious mindset is helpful for remaining comfortable with uncertainty and diversity, in various forms.

In addition to understanding my assumptions about conflict models, I must also provide my assumptions about conflict itself. The assumptions are as follows: 1) conflicts are a part of everyday life and have positive potential, 2) the nonviolent expression of conflict should be generally encouraged, 3) developing both individual and shared responsibility for conflict is valuable, 4) voluntary participation in conflict management is likely to increase the overall success of the process and 5) a general openness to differences is helpful in a pluralistic community.

Coaching

Coaching has traditionally referred to the activity of training athletes or athletic teams. When Americans think of coaching, many recall famous professional sport coaches from television, or sport coaches from their childhood and teenage years. These impressions of coaching are often deeply positive. For example, mega-star Michael Jordan played basketball with the Chicago Bulls as long as he did because of the relationship he had with his coach, Phil Jackson. Prior to his final year, Jordan insisted that the Bulls keep Jackson as their coach otherwise he would not play.

People may be connecting with the coaching metaphor, in part, because of the following associations: the emphasis is external, the focus is on the future, the relationship is directed toward goals and success, the player is respected for his/her strength and the relationship is a highly regarded helping relationship.

The positive impressions associated with coaching make people want to extend it to non-sporting relationships. There is *coaching for specific communication skills*, in which the focus is on a person's one-on-one

skill development process. Typically, this involves an outside trainer/coach working with an employee on a single communication skill such as giving and receiving feedback, using inclusive language, or speaking more assertively. The coach works with the employee for a set amount of time to support a pre-specified behavioral change. Coaching of this type is not necessarily tied to the possibility of promotion for the employee.

Coaching for managerial development also exists. A common type of organizational coaching involves an internal or external coach working to develop a potential managerial candidate. This form of coaching may focus on a particular skill but is likely to be broader in scope. Oftentimes, a supervisor acts as a subordinate's coach. This use of the word "coach" is sometimes frowned upon because of the perceived incompatibility between the directing function of a supervisor and the supporting function of a coach.

Whole life coaching has received attention over the past few years. There has been a boom in the demand for coaches who not only support an individual's professional development but also his/her personal development. The individual seeking coaching services usually hires these coaches privately. These coaches, often called personal coaches, tend to meet weekly with each client, for between half an hour and an hour, either in person or on the phone.

Conflict Coaching

Conflict coaching is a relatively innovative and distinctive form of coaching. It involves working one-on-one with those involved in interpersonal conflicts. Just as there are different general types of coaching, so too are there different approaches to conflict coaching. These approaches include the following:

Interest-based, problem-solving conflict coaching - Tidwell (1997) created a conflict coaching model that was derived from Fisher and Ury's (1983) interest based negotiation model. This model has the coach assist the participant in uncovering the likely interests of all parties to a conflict. The coach also supports the participant's exploration of common ground and creative solutions.

Transformative conflict coaching - Bush and Folger's (1994) transformative approach to mediation offers another way of structuring conflict coaching. Their view replaces the emphasis on interests with an emphasis on empowerment (strength of self) and recognition (acknowledgment of other). While not formally developed into a coaching model, a focus on empowerment and recognition could form the basis of a distinctive approach to coaching. The transformative conflict coach would probably strive to minimize his/her directiveness by, for example, not following a linear model and not using the skill of reframing (rewording statements to make them less negative). The transformative coach would attempt to have the coaching participant lead the process. This would include not trying to

change the participant's language.

Narrative conflict coaching - Just as Bush and Folger proposed an alternative to the dominant model of interest based mediation, so too did others. Winslade and Monk's (2000) narrative mediation model is another possible bridge to a new model of conflict coaching. Narrative mediation theory is interested in the ways humans use stories to make sense of their lives and the ways different stories can lead to conflict and resolution. Narrative mediation might be used to design a model of conflict coaching where current conflict stories are identified and the possibilities of new, more effective stories are explored.

Conflict styles coaching - This approach involves using the Thomas-Kilman Conflict Styles Instrument to determine a participant's conflict styles profile. It then moves to an exploration of a particular conflict situation using the profile as conversational springboard. This model provides a fairly structured coaching model that new coaches can learn quickly and that remains reasonably sensitive to the unique life situations of participants. The conflict styles approach to conflict coaching includes assessments of the participant's general conflict style and style choice considerations in a specific conflict. Although the conflict styles approach to conflict coaching uses a standardized measurement device, the conflict styles coach encourages the participant to bring his or her own experience to evaluating conflict categories and relational behaviors. Conflict coaching has been shown to work well as one part of a campus alternative dispute resolution program. It may also be applied in various other settings both within and beyond the educational sector.

Conflict Styles Coaching

The conflict style coaching model has been used for the past four years by the Conflict Education Resource Team (CERT) at Temple University. It is for this reason that I focus on this particular model.

The Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument has a straightforward format that most individuals find insightful and practical. The instrument is a multiple-choice survey that plots a person's conflict styles profile. The profile consists of five styles (accommodate, avoid, collaborate, compete, and compromise) differently positioned along two dimensions (assertiveness and cooperativeness). The instrument has been widely used, particularly with managers in business settings.

Conflict coaching model consists of four main parts. The introduction involves establishing rapport, discussing confidentiality, and talking through goals for the session. The conflict styles portion includes the participant completing the survey, learning and giving examples of the five styles, and discussing style tendencies. The section on developing choices in a particular conflict includes selecting a particular interpersonal conflict situation and using the conflict styles to do a detailed exploration of choices and perspectives. The closing is an opportunity for final reflections and for the completion of an evaluation

form.

Effective coaches are typically recognized as above average in their confidence and self-awareness, concern for others, perspective-taking ability, and ability to verbally and non-verbally communicate. Candidates who are already distinguished in these areas can typically learn to be a competent coach after twelve hours of training. Of course, ongoing development in a community of coaches is highly recommended, particularly if the coach strives to be outstanding with a wide array of coaching participants and conflict cases.

Conflict styles coaching can be offered with a variety of other alternative dispute resolution (ADR) services such as mediation and dialogue processes. The campus ADR program can partner with an administrative department of the university (e.g., counseling center or student assistance center), an academic department (e.g., communication sciences, education, law, psychology, social work) or a student organization (e.g., student government). Whatever the case, coaching referrals can come formally or informally from throughout the university. A formal referral system may be established with university housing, the university disciplinary committee, and with various other bodies that regularly encounter student conflicts.

CERT's Use of Conflict Styles Coaching

The conflict styles coaching model is successful for CERT because undergraduate coaches are able to competently facilitate a process in which participants frequently get valuable new ideas about how to handle interpersonal conflict. The same basic process seems to work for walk-in participants, participants referred from university disciplinary proceedings and participants referred from academic classes.

The conflict styles model, as it is used at CERT, encounters at least two major challenges. First, the survey instrument used in this model was based on research with managers in business settings and therefore may not be applicable to campus settings. Related to this challenge is the authoritative/expert tone the survey may create. These challenges are mitigated by the coach making them transparent to the participant by explaining them and by inviting the participant to agree or disagree with the survey findings. Second, a coach's thorough understanding of the conflict styles is sometimes not enough of a knowledge base to respond to the expectations of coaching participants. Coaches undergo ongoing development in order to meet participants' fairly common requests for assistance with particular communication competencies.

Below is an outline of the conflict styles coaching process, as used by CERT. The outline is borrowed with permission from Temple University's Conflict Education Resource Team.

Introduction

- Personal introductions
- Introduction to CERT and UCS
- Confidentiality
- Coaching explanation (i.e., focus on behavioral choices and behavioral interactions and not psychological issues)
- What to expect in this session
- Participant hopes and expectations for the session

Conflict Styles

- Introduction to the conflict styles instrument
- Complete and score the instrument
- Participant reflections: "What it was like to do the survey?"
- The survey in perspective
- An explanation of each style (made in reference to the scored instrument)
- Participant shares example of using each style (do individual style explanation and example cycles)
- Style choice factors
- Emphasize the "collaborative perspective" (combining personal empowerment and concern for other even though the conflict might not end in a collaborative outcome)
- Participant shares reactions on the styles and the style profile

Developing Choices in a Particular Conflict

- Introduction to a conflict exploration
- Participant describes the conflict and, if helpful, the background to the conflict
- Participant establishes what it would mean to approach the conflict from each of the five conflict styles
- Participant evaluates the choices represented by the respective styles
- Participant develops optimal choices
- Participant determines next steps to take (i.e., in the actual conflict)
- General reflections, questions, and reworking
- Summary of the conflict exploration process

Close

- Acknowledge the challenges and opportunities of conflict
- Invite final reflections and questions, particularly on what was most valuable and/or useful
- Briefly summarize the participant's key points from throughout the session
- Handout evaluation and exchange good-byes

Potential Growth Opportunities for Conflict Coaching

Conflict coaching can be developed through assessment of different coaching models. It would also be useful to research the conflict styles coaching process, research the interest based coaching process, develop other approaches to coaching and perform a detailed comparison of models.

Promote Conflict Coaching within Higher Education

Conflict can be promoted within higher education by introducing the process directly to students. It would also be useful to 1) work with student organizations, 2) create a formal or informal referral system in partnership with university housing, the university disciplinary committee, or other administrative or academic parts of the university and 3) clarify how coaching and other conflict management services (e.g., ombuds programs) relate with one another.

Conclusion

As the alternative dispute resolution field matures and recognizes the limits of current processes like mediation, additional processes will no doubt be proposed and pursued. One relatively new ADR process that has already shown promise is conflict coaching. Judging by the way that the general public has received other forms of coaching, the further development of conflict coaching seems assured. While at least a couple of models of conflict coaching have already been applied and while additional models have been conceived, a great deal of work remains in strengthening these approaches and possibly in envisioning others.

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A Related Book

Timothy E. Ursiny designed a handbook about coaching titled "The Coaches Handbook: Exercises for Resolving Conflict in the Workplace". This handbook is specifically for the internal coach or manager working within a business setting. To find out more about this book, visit <http://www.advantagecoaching.com/products.html#books>.

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