

Beyond Mediation Committee – Conflict Coaching Presentation and Paper with Pattie Porter & Cinnie Noble

What is conflict coaching?

Conflict coaching, **also known as conflict management coaching** is a one on one process in which a trained coach supports clients to strengthen their conflict competence including their confidence and comfort to engage more effectively in their interpersonal disputes. This process may also be used for pre-mediation to prepare parties to participate more effectively in the mediation process or to prepare for any facilitated dialogue/discussion.

Who are your coaching clients/training participants?

Most of our clients are leaders within organizations (public, private and non-profit). However, the process applies to any context in which the clients want to improve and gain increased ability to manage their way of being in conflict – such as within family disputes (couples and families in general), wills and estates issues, any workplace matters, etc..

People seeking coaching (or are referred) come

- **before a dispute** arises and they want to address the issue pre-empting unnecessary conflict;
- **during a conflict** when it is derailing and the client wants to manage the dynamic more effectively or,
- it may be **after the dispute** when the client continues to agonize, where their resilience is low and things remain unresolved for them (and they want to figure out how to best proceed, learn from the situation, rebuild the relationship, etc.).

Conflict management coaching is also for clients who want to generally improve their conflict competence. For example, they wish to be less conflict avoidant and want to have a stronger voice to speak up about their concerns. They wish to manage themselves more constructively when triggered, or to improve their way of being or communicating in whatever context they are struggling – in their work, their relationship within a family etc. They wish to change their conflict habits that do not serve them or others well.

Training participants:

Generally, our training participants are coaches, mediators, HR professionals, Ombuds, lawyers, union reps, leaders in organizations (public, private and non-profit), psychologists, social workers, therapists.

What are the differences in how you work with clients/training participants pre-and post-covid?**Coaching clients:**

There is no real difference for what we experience. For Cinnie, she began coaching (in 1999) in-person but also, by telephone and SKYPE for international clients. I began coaching in 2003 using the same methods including What's App and Adobe Connect a few years ago. The switch to on-line was not unusual or counterintuitive in any ways. Therefore, ZOOM, Teams, and other virtual platforms have easily become part of our mode of operation.

As a matter of fact, not all clients want to be seen while being coached but rather, they say they reflect better without someone looking at them during the coaching conversation. Both Cinnie and I continue to do phone coaching or video-off for those clients. It is more feasible to pick up on voice tone and cadence changes by via auditory interactions. There is a tendency to ask more questions about somatic signs of stress when I hear clients' emotions and changes in mood etc. and as a consequence, I find clients gain insights and awareness when they are asked to do so. Generally, they become more self aware about how they physically show up and demonstrate their emotions.

Training:

For Cinnie, in the early 90s, her coach training was mostly by phone when there weren't easily accessible platforms and coaching schools wanted to reach people around the world for training.

For Pattie, since the mid 2000s, I have conducted the trainings in-person (typically a 4-day training) as well as virtually using Adobe Connect, and then exclusively online since the pandemic started using Zoom.

Online training opens the door to many participants who might not have been able to attend in-person because they didn't have the travel budget or the chunk of time to leave family or work obligations.

- We have seen a surge in international students...Russia, South Africa, Israel, Ireland, Poland, Guatemala, etc.
 - o Also being more culturally aware of how we train dealing with high and low context communications, cultural norms, etc.

- People with disabilities
- It also affords more opportunities to use certified coach mentors from around the US and Canada that we might not have used during the in-person trainings.

One of the differences we noticed, even though we have both been training online, is addressing online video fatigue. People are on some type of virtual platform daily for hours at a time. We have had to rethink process design considering asynchronous activities as well as more breakout group activities, reflection time, and shorter live training segments.

People say they miss most the interactions that happen over lunch and breaks for in-person classes. More thought has gone into how to ensure interaction in and out of class to enrich the learning – with even more exercises than they do in face to face workshops.

We continue to experiment with different delivery formats.

- Spread out class times over a 4-7 week period with practice sessions outside of class time
- Asynchronous activities for self-study or partner study (e.g. practicing an Intake session with a partner or watching a video demonstration)

We only teach on-line and will continue to do so. When things open up, we will add the in-person training again. There is room for both types of training. In fact, we expect accredited trainers will likely choose to offer a hybrid of on-line and in-person which could be a very enriching training.

What preparations occur with coaching clients? training participants?

Coaching clients:

At this time based on our experiences, nothing has changed, in terms of how we prepare our clients. They still receive foundational materials and a coaching contract along with pre-coaching questions to support them reflect and get clarity to their coaching goals. All intake sessions are still completed by phone or online platform.

Training:

As an accredited program with the International Coaching Federation we follow certain guidelines to ensure people get their Core Competency and Resource Development credits. We aim to meet the rigor of ICF and provide training consistent with their competencies and requirement.

Preparation includes:

- 1) Sending course materials in advance which typically were given at the in-person trainings. During COVID, mail services were suspended, extremely slow, or very expensive to mail. We had to adjust and send the materials electronically.
- 2) Coach mentors are assigned to students prior to first day of class to schedule their practice sessions outside of class time. This gives extra time needed to protect space in everyone's calendars.
- 3) Students are strongly encouraged to read book chapters before the 1st day of class to prepare for a robust discussion.
- 4) New asynchronous activities include video recording demonstrations of an intake session, and parts of the coaching model for students to watch between classes. We use active learning worksheets asking students to respond to questions about what they are observing in the video.
- 5) Ongoing reading and reflection activities between classes.
- 6) Considering disability accommodations and setting this up in advance such as closed-captioning on Power Point slide decks, recordings and use of ASL interpreters (recordings or live classes)

What don't we like about online coaching and training?

On-line coaching

There is nothing we don't like about it....it works for our clients from all over the world and locally. Most people are accustomed to online coaching and even locals prefer it for a variety of reasons.

Training

Like the participants, we too like seeing people in person and interacting in a forum that is more conducive to getting to know participants better- to connect. We have adapted the program though to be as effective as possible about ensuring participants have chances to meet and work with everyone in class at some point. Classes are kept to a maximum of 12 to facilitate that as much as possible. We will continue to offer on-line training as well as a hybrid.

What is the one thing we as mediators can learn from your experience during Covid?

We have had the opportunity to rethink how we deliver services, how we teach, how we connect. Two big takeaways:

- 1) We as a field are resilient and able to adapt to the change in circumstances to serve our clients well despite the pandemic.
- 2) There has been a movement toward ODR for many years. Thought leaders such as Colin Rule, Dan Rainey, Jeff Arresty, and many more

dispute resolution practitioners have already been educating, guiding, and developing best practices. It took the pandemic to move the rest of us into this realm whether we liked it or not. As mediators, we need to think about embracing change to serve our clients local or afar. We need to be agile and open to future possibilities with curiosity. Put resistance aside. Being outside of your comfort zone allows you to grow as a professional and supports the field develop in directions, we did not think possible or feasible.