Conflict Coaching: A Powerful ADR Tool

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Introduction

Conflict coaching is defined as a set of skills and strategies used to support peoples' ability to engage in, manage, or productively resolve conflict. In this process, the conflict coach works one-on-one with a coachee experiencing conflict with another person. Conflict coaching enables the coachee to talk about the conflict with a neutral third party (the conflict coach), consider options for managing the conflict, and design an approach to discuss the conflict with the other person. Conflict coaching can be used as a stand-alone process, or can be practiced with each of the parties in separate meetings during mediation.

Conflict coaching can be useful in a variety of circumstances, including conflicts in the workplace, divorce and post-decree situations, community disputes, family disagreements, or business conflicts In such situations, the conflict coach can serve as a confidential listener, help the coachee to see the situation from all perspectives, support the coachee in considering options, and help the coachee to come up with a plan of action to deal with the conflict. In conflict coaching, the coachee, not the conflict coach, is responsible for the outcome. The conflict coach uses process skills to help the coachee develop more clarity about the situation, enabling the coachee to effectively and confidently make high-quality decisions to manage the conflict. Also, the conflict coach can help the coachee rehearse a conversation so that the coachee is prepared to more confidently enter into the conflict resolution discussion.

To demonstrate how conflict coaching might be implemented, let's examine the following workplace dispute: Bill and Jane are in the same department and often need to work on projects jointly. For the last couple of months, their working relationship has been fraught with conflict. Bill and Jane's supervisor, Charlie, told both of them that they need to work their differences out as the conflict was impacting the entire work team. Charlie told them that if they needed help resolving the conflict, they should consult with HR, as he had heard that HR has conflict coaching and mediation resources at their disposal. For several weeks, however, neither Jane, nor Bill took any initiative in resolving the conflict. The conflict, meanwhile, continued to simmer and worsened over time. The other day, Bill reached a frustration

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threshold and decided to visit with Lisa, an HR generalist in the organization, who has received conflict coaching training. Bill agreed to engage in conflict coaching with Lisa serving as coach. These are the steps that took place over a period of two conflict coaching sessions of 1-1/2 hours each.

Step 1: Build Rapport

Lisa and Bill engaged in a bit of small talk, exchanged background information, and captured a sense of one another's communication style. Lisa noted that Bill was fairly concise and to the point, and perhaps needed to be drawn out through powerful questions. Lisa acknowledged Bill for asking Lisa to help him proactively work through conflicts with Jane.

Step 2: Overview of Coaching Process

Lisa described her role as conflict coach and asked Bill for his expectations regarding her role to make sure that these expectations were aligned. She described the steps of the coaching model and the types of questions she might ask Bill at each stage. Lisa suggested to Bill that coaching will be especially effective if Bill enters into coaching with an open mind, a willingness to look at the issue from all perspectives, focus, and an orientation to meet both his *and* Jane's needs. Also, Lisa reviewed confidentiality parameters, reminded Bill that he can discontinue coaching at any time, and discussed logistics. She then obtained Bill's commitment to enter into the coaching process.

Step 3: identify Client's Goals

Lisa asked Bill to state his goals for conflict coaching generally and his goals for this particular meeting. Bill stated that his general goal was to improve his working relationship with Jane. His specific goals for this coaching meeting included talking through the situation with Lisa and looking at process options that would meet his general goal. Lisa reminded Bill that he could change his goal, or add additional goals at any time during the coaching process

Step 4: Client's Sharing of Perspectives

In this stage of the process, Bill was invited to share his perspective on the incident or incidents that led to the existing conflict. At times, Bill reflected some emotional intensity and Lisa acknowledged his feelings. Lisa also asked Bill about his needs going forward. After asking Bill to describe the situation from his own perspective, Lisa asked Bill to explore Jane's perspective. She asked Bill to articulate what Jane's feelings might be, and postulate on Jane's needs going

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forward. As Lisa asked powerful questions to help Bill deeply consider Jane's perspective, there was a perceptible shift in Bill's orientation. For the first time, Bill realized that there *could be* a different perspective, which was extremely enlightening to him and laid the foundation for productive conflict resolution.

Step 5: Explore and Test Options

After fully examining perspectives, Bill was ready to explore and test options. Options that Bill considered included: taking Jane to lunch to try to talk through the conflict, meeting in a business setting, having someone mediate a discussion, and sending Jane an e-mail. Lisa asked Bill to consider criteria to evaluate the options. His criteria included: simplicity, comfort, minimize chances of rejection, and enable a personal connection. Using these criteria as a backdrop, Lisa asked Bill to evaluate the pros and cons of each option. After doing so, Bill felt that meeting with Jane in a business setting was the best option.

Interim Step: Define Next Steps (for next coaching session)

Since Lisa and Bill were at the end of the 1-1/2 hour time period allocated for this conflict coaching session, Lisa asked Bill to reflect on any insights that he gleaned from the discussion thus far. She suggested that he write these insights down so that he would not forget them.

Then, Lisa asked Bill to do some 'homework' to prepare for the next meeting. She asked him to make a list of the specific things that he would want to say to Jane in their discussion. Lisa indicated that Bill would have the chance to discuss his ideas with Lisa at the next coaching meeting and practice the conversation. Bill and Lisa scheduled the next meeting, to be held two days later and Bill went back to his office.

Step 5: Explore and Test Options, Continued

Lisa welcomed Bill back to coaching two days after the prior session. She checked in with him to see if there were any new insights, new developments, or if anything shifted in Bill's thinking since the last meeting. Bill was satisfied that things were still on the track that was established at the last coaching meeting. Bill had done a lot of thinking about what he wanted to say to Jane and how he wanted to say it. Bill reviewed his plan with Lisa. Lisa proposed that Bill practice his conversation, with Lisa role playing as Jane. Lisa asked Bill how she should play the role and invited Bill to recalibrate at any time during the practice conversation. Bill gave Lisa permission to interrupt to provide feedback on how his message was delivered and, if applicable, to suggest that he consider a different approach.

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Bill and Lisa then went into the role play. Bill conveyed his perspective, carefully framing his message and monitoring his tone of voice and body language. Lisa made every effort to play the role of Jane accurately. At logical juncture points, Lisa stopped the role play for discussion and feedback. She asked Bill how the conversation felt to him so far and gave him feedback on how some of his statements 'landed' on her. She then gave Bill an opportunity to 'replay' some statements to increase the likelihood that Jane would respond positively. Lisa also asked Bill what roadblocks could arise in the discussion and how he might handle them. The role playing lasted approximately 45 minutes. By the end of the practice discussion, Bill felt confident about having a conversation with Jane.

Step 6: Define Next Steps

After the role play was completed, Bill reaffirmed that he would like to proceed with the conversation with Jane. Lisa then invited Bill to map out an action plan going forward. Guided by Lisa's questions, Bill specified logistics and timing for initiating a conversation with Jane. He agreed to send Jane an e-mail when he returned to his office that day asking her if she would be willing to meet with him to discuss their communication and working relationship. Assuming Jane agreed, he would schedule the conference room on the first floor for their discussion. If Jane did not agree to meet, Bill would visit with Lisa again to determine possible next steps to manage that setback. Lisa asked Bill if he would send her an e-mail or visit with her in person after his discussion with Jane to let her know how things went. Bill agreed to do so. Lisa reiterated her availability to support Bill in working to resolve the conflict. Bill left, empowered to go forward with his plan.

Conclusion

As illustrated above, conflict coaching can be a powerful tool to help manage conflict. The conflict coach helps the coachee think through multiple aspects of a conflict and consider options to improve the situation. The conflict coach serves an important role by asking questions, providing feedback, offering insights, and especially by active listening. Conflict coaching can be useful at any stage of a conflict, both formally and informally and should be considered when there is an ongoing working relationship or need to communicate.

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