

GUEST EDITORIAL WORKPLACE CONFLICT STRATEGIES: CONFLICT COACHING VERSUS MEDIATION

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Abstract

Conflict is a regularly occurring component of professional settings; any given workplace will experience conflict daily, and a well-equipped manager or dispute resolution system can help with managing conflict cycles. Two options for long-term conflict management within an organization are conflict coaching and an institutional mediation process. While both methods for managing conflict have their values, they also have their shortcomings. Conflict coaching, which trains leaders to manage conflict through integrative training and follow-up, is more effective for empowering leaders to manage conflict within the organization and on many different levels of the organizational hierarchy, while mediation, which relies on a balance of power and a dialogue-focused setting, is more effective for individuals on the same level of the organizational power hierarchy to come to their own solution through the help of a mediator.

Introduction

Wilmot and Hocker (2011) define mediation as a conflict resolution method in which a mediator assists two parties in reaching a solution or agreement: the mediator “is to facilitate the parties to the dispute to reach an agreement themselves.” Additionally, the mediator serves as a “listener, suggestion-giver, the formulator of final agreements to which both sides have contributed” (Wilmot & Hocker, p. 279).

In other words, the mediator is not in charge of necessarily providing the solution. Instead, the mediator assists with creating an environment in which the conflicting parties can determine a solution themselves. Mediators are more of a supportive crutch in the solution-seeking process; they can help establish ground rules, encourage open dialogue, and ask questions to guide the parties to seek solution options. They are also caretakers to the relationship, and help the parties repair or continue a relationship, whether professional or personal (Raines, 2013).

Mediation

Mediation has its advantages in the workplace in regards to parties that serve on the same level of organizational hierarchy, because mediation allows for both parties’ concerns and motives to come forward for consideration, heard and addressed in an equal manner; both sides are considered because both parties have the opportunity to speak for themselves (Hermann, 2012). Indeed, one of the biggest downsides to mediation is when an imbalance of power occurs, so that one side is less likely to defend themselves fully or participate with the gusto and authority of the other party involved. For example, mediation is often a poor choice for women in abusive

relationships, because qualitative evidence points to a lack of self-defense in a mediation situation because of the lack of power the abused feels, even in an environment when they are given the opportunity to represent their needs under the supervision of a mediator (Vestal, 2007). Because power imbalances can taint an otherwise participatory and satisfactory method of conflict resolution, leaders must carefully examine the power of a given party before proceeding with mediation. When both sides are on the same level of power or similar levels of power, then mediation can succeed in creating a fair process that allows both parties to have a say in the outcome.

Another advantage to mediation is its ability to appropriately handle highly emotional situations. This advantage is due largely in part because mediation allows both parties to speak for themselves, so their concerns and motives are validated by their own perspectives; it largely eliminates the risk of a third party speaking for them and misconstruing their intentions (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011). McKenzie (2012) writes that mediation has increased in popularity in several facets of the workforce because of its ability to meet the needs of emotionally charged situations: “considered to be effective in disputes involving strong emotions, mediation is increasingly popular as a means to resolve discrimination and harassment complaints.” Additionally, McKenzie (2012) found in a study centered on psychological injury claims that an organization’s mediation success revolves around having a concrete system in place that is implemented business-wide; there must be a broad commitment to creating a system and that is supported by all involved:

“The process of mediation has the potential to be an effective method of resolving psychological injury claims due to workplace relationship breakdown, especially when supported by organizational commitment to Alternative Dispute Resolution strategies, policies and processes, and conducted by independent, skilled mediators. However, since there is a lack of literature on mediation in the occupational rehabilitation and return to work contexts, it is recommended that further research be undertaken.”

Conflict Coaching

However, in settings where emotions are not necessarily a critical component of the outcome, mediation again sees a disadvantage: more process-driven conflicts or conflicts that require upper-level decision making within a hierarchy may be better suited for a process that champions building the skills of leadership. This is where conflict coaching comes into play as a better method within a business structure.

“Conflict coaching involves a coach working with a client to improve the client’s conflict understanding, interaction strategies, and/or interactions skills” (Brinkert, 2011). While conflict coaching can involve clients of all levels of an organization’s hierarchy, it often occurs on a managerial level because managers often handle conflict from a multi-level perspective. Additionally, there is a branch of conflict coaching called executive conflict coaching, which serves as a form of professional development in a one-on-one setting for organizational management (Jones & Brinkert, 2008). Conflict coaching centers around the growth of an individual within a business structure, so that they may better identify conflict styles, strategize conflict managing solutions, engage in negotiations, and confidently manage conflict outcomes through the support of a conflict coach (Grant & Stober, 2006).

A benefit of conflict coaching is that its long-term impact can include a manager's continued development in conflict leadership; they are learning from a coach and long after the coaching ends, they can continue to apply the conflict concepts to both large-scale and small-scale business engagements. In a study of the benefits of conflict coaching within a hospital setting, Brinkert (2011) found that there was strong evidence to support the success of conflict management in process-based conflicts:

“Benefits included supervisor conflict coaching competency and enhanced conflict communication competency for nurse managers and supervisees facing specific conflict situations. Challenges included the management of programme tensions.”

However, the shortcoming of conflict coaching is that it does not always succeed in the more emotional aspects, as Brinkert (2011) found with ongoing tensions in the nursing leadership study, particularly in the more difficult areas that nurses often face such as mortality and morbidity (Brinkert p. 84). Conflict coaching does strive, however, to follow a pattern that allows them to get the root of a given conflict, such as the Comprehensive Conflict Coaching Model, or CCC Model. The CCC Model's design focuses on uncovering and examining the narrative, and emphasizes improving communication (Jones & Brinkert, 2008). In fact, Brinkert (2011) noted the importance of the CCC Model within the nursing study, and wrote about the impact of uncovering the story because it allowed the nurse managers to better identify and handle conflict within the hospital. The nurse managers participated in 12 hours of conflict coaching followed by follow-up sessions, and found success with handling conflict both during and after receiving coaching compared to before the coaching sessions:

“Many attributed their success to the use of one or more effective strategies and skills such as demonstrating respect, listening effectively and knowing when to engage. It was not uncommon for nurse managers to express reasonable comfort and success in dealing with conflict but to also note that there were certainly aspects of conflict that were outside of their control” (Brinkert, p. 85).

Clearly, conflict coaching succeeds in developing the conflict skills of clients, and gives them the tools necessary to engage in daily workplace conflict. Its greatest triumph in this case was arguably its ability to allow the nurse managers to implement specific coaching-related tools through ongoing learning sessions and one-on-one coaching.

Mediation Versus Conflict Coaching

The biggest difference between mediation and conflict coaching remains that where conflict coaching develops an individual with the tools to face current and future conflicts by equipping the individual with strategies and skills in a learning environment, mediation allows two parties to work out their own solution through dialogue facilitated by a trained mediator. Where mediation succeeds with allowing both parties to express themselves, conflict coaching can sometimes fail because discovering the story is ultimately in the hands of the client as they work to piece together a conflict puzzle on their own. Where conflict coaching succeeds in equipping a leader with the tools to reach a solution determined by their best effort and use of conflict tools, mediation sometimes fails to provide a solution, or to occur at all, because at least one, if not

both parties, may be unwilling to even engage in mediation or are ill-equipped to do so because of power imbalances (Herrmann, 2012). In either case, however, both mediators and coaches need training and experience to facilitate either coaching or mediation, because ill-equipped leaders can sometimes guide a conflict to a “quick fix,” which, while sometimes appropriate, does not often lead to a fully resolved conflict because the root was not found (Copeland & Wida, 1996). Both mediation and conflict coaching can lead to finding the root of the conflict, and indeed, both should strive to if implemented correctly, but mediation seeks to let the parties themselves find the root while conflict coaching is a system of training that allows the client to learn to find the root through communication and narrative.

It is important to recognize as well that conflict coaching and mediation are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, a conflict coach may train their client in the art of mediation as a strategy or tool for particular disputes within an organization: “conflict coaching may be used to help parties in preparing for mediation or a rights-based process” (Herrmann, p. 45). Additionally, it would not be a detriment to an organization to implement both, as both conflict coaching and mediation has distinct benefits. However, based on the benefits and downfalls of both conflict strategies, conflict coaching is a better choice for developing individual business leaders so that they may confidently manage conflict on a variety of organizational levels. Mediation, with its focus on individuals working with each other in cooperative solution seeking and dialogue centered around emotion and motive, is a better strategy for individuals that fall on the same, or *closely*-related, level of an organizational hierarchy, as power imbalances are mediation’s downfall.

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