THE CONFLICT COMPETENT LEADER

(Published in the November, 2008 edition of the Canadian Government Executive Magazine.)

Managed effectively, conflict increases collaborative problem solving, heightens team connectivity, enhances communications, and improves morale and productivity. Mismanaged, it increases stress and reduces performance. The development of conflict competent leaders is important. Yet many organizations ignore this as a core competency for their leaders, middle managers and staff.

Key competencies go beyond how leaders themselves engage in disputes and conflict in which they are directly involved. Being conflict competent includes skills that equip leaders to facilitate effective conflict conversations, among their reports and between the work unit and others.

What knowledge, skills and abilities are required by leaders to create and sustain a conflict competent organization? One whose culture supports the notion that conflict is a positive and necessary part of work? How can all employees gain the requisite skills to engage effectively in conflict? How can the organization support staff who raise concerns, reassuring them they will be respectfully heard and addressed, without retribution?

People are promoted to leadership positions for many reasons, including their demonstrated skills and abilities. Organizations often realize (sometimes too late) that technical skill does not mean people have facility to manage conflict competently; many leaders admit to lacking in the related skills and abilities. Educational courses on conflict management and mediation abound. However, learning that translates into shifts in conflict conduct, which enhances individuals' abilities to effectively engage in conflict, are not as plentiful.

Conflict, the inevitable disagreements between and among people, which causes distress and disharmony, is enhanced when there is interdependency at work, which is increasingly the case in our networked lives. Management of those conflicts requires processes that involve ongoing assistance, support and accountabilities to leaders and staff.

Conflict conduct
Most of us rely on patterns for managing conflict that we learn from our parents, siblings, teachers, peers and other relationships. We learn what to do and what not to do and, generally, do not spend a lot of time examining how to change our conflict conduct. In our working relationships, we continue to rely on old habits and trial and error. However, when people have the opportunity to unbundle their conflict conduct, including what provokes them and why, they are more likely to gain awareness that helps them learn how to shift behaviours that do not work for them.

While many of us have habitual ways of responding to conflict, we are not aware of how we are perceived, or the impact on others. This is often what is missing in efforts to identify the changes needed to become conflict competent. A useful tool is a 360-degree assessment and an individual-only profile, which may be used to facilitate the development of conflict competencies. The assessments identify destructive and constructive responses and inspire insights on specific behaviours that tend to increase tension, rather than leading to problem solving. Some of these "destructive responses," as they are referred to, include "winning at all costs," "displaying anger," "demeaning others," "retaliating," and "hiding emotions."

On the other hand, "constructive responses" move conflict into more productive ways of interacting. These behaviours generally involve controlling impulses, exploring the issues, sharing impact and creating mutually satisfying solutions. Some specific behaviours are "taking perspective," "expressing emotions," "reaching out," and "reflective thinking." Research from the Leadership Development Institute indicates, as well may be expected, that employing effective constructive responses and reducing destructive responses, result in less stress and higher performance.

Some tools that identify conflict management styles include: the Conflict Dynamics Profile; the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, Style Matters: The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory, Dealing with Conflict Instrument by Alexander Hiam and Intercultural Development Inventory.

Change requires commitment
Developing leaders requires, as a starting point, a commitment by the organization to build a culture of conflict competence. This is not an easy or straightforward task and is often most effective when organizations embark on the development of an Integrated or Informal Conflict Management System. Such systems are best designed by first conducting a workplace audit or other type of assessment, that considers the particular workplace and its staff's needs. Based on the results, it is then necessary to establish criteria for conflict competencies for all levels of staff, beginning with the senior leaders. Depending on the organization's vision of a conflict competent workplace and the criteria developed, a system also requires its leaders and all other staff to engage in some process or processes to identify what aspects of their conflict conduct they will work on and shift to meet the criteria. For changes to happen, it is necessary to build in ways to monitor and evaluate progress. Like any other change in organizations, it is necessary to contemplate and address possible resistance.

An effective way to build individual conflict competence – that contributes to the collective objective to build a conflict competent organization – is with conflict coaching. Conflict coaching is a one-on-one process that combines conflict management and executive coaching principles. This individualized technique requires people to articulate and concentrate on reaching their objectives with respect to enhancing their particular areas for development. This form of coaching, like other types of executive coaching, is

most effective when there is a commitment to engage in the process and measure progress.

The overall organizational intervention is supported by individual development.

A customized approach is recommended, for developing and sustaining conflict proficient leaders and others. The huge task of shifting corporate culture and its human capital to become adept at engaging in conflict requires a commitment to this objective and its related components. It also requires commitment to the notion that one size does not fit all. Planning requires a collaborative effort aimed at finding the formula that best suits each organization. To sustain change that reflects the organization's vision, it is necessary to ensure its leaders "walk the talk," by supporting the vision and by demonstrating conflict competence, in all of their interactions.

Conclusion
Any initiative to build a culture of conflict competence begins with the commitment of the organization's senior leaders to provide their support and to model conflict proficiency. It cannot be overstated that leaders who enhance their own skills and abilities set an example that has a significant impact on the rest of the workforce. Similarly, it is in the leaders' and other stakeholders' interests to work continually and cooperatively, to help make the workplace one in which staff members may confidently and comfortably raise issues where there is conflict, knowing they will be respectfully addressed.

Cinnie Noble, C.M., ACC, LL.B., LL.M. (ADR), is a social worker, lawyer-mediator and certified coach (cinnie@cinergycoaching.com).