

Cutting Edge ... Cutting the Cost: The Business Case for Conflict Coaching¹ in a Government Workplace

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Conflict results in overt and hidden costs for organisations. Unresolved conflict results in even greater costs and badly managed conflict undermines individuals and the organisation, swallowing money and resources. In fact:

“Some experts believe that unresolved conflict represents the largest reducible cost in many businesses yet the financial, human and credibility costs of conflict in the workplace are not measured in most organisations nor pro-actively managed”³

An Australian NSW (New South Wales) government department has addressed the problem with innovation. A business case for a new model of conflict management and resolution presents compelling financial evidence for the need for, and efficacy of, change. Based on formal processes being the last not the first step the model views conflict through a **CINERGY** © Conflict Management Coaching approach which either immediately resolves issues or, paves the way for further resolution.

The NSW Pilot

The subject of this article is a Government organisation which provides services across NSW in metropolitan, rural and regional areas. It employs around 7,000 staff ranging from IT and management to blue-collar and factory workers. Human Resources estimated that 50% of their time was spent on managing discipline and grievances, most of which involved conflict.

Conflict was involved in most of the grievance and discipline cases managed by Human Resources in the subject organisation. The 213 cases reviewed over 18 months included

¹Conflict management coaching is also known as conflict coaching and this article specifically refers to the **CINERGY**© Conflict Management Coaching model .

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³ H Buss, “Controlling Conflict Costs: The Business Case of Conflict management” (2011) 4 (1) Journal of the International Ombudsman Association 54.

elements (some multiple) including bullying, harassment, threats, stress, bad language discrimination, offensive emails, inappropriate sick leave and repeated poor performance.

The review noted that workplace conflict often resulted in Workers Compensation psychological injury stress claims, which are defined as being caused by work pressure workplace bullying, other mental stress and other harassment issues.

Role of CINERGY © Conflict Management Coaching

A study compared traditionally managed conflict and grievances to those handled with an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) approach. The ADR cases started with **CINERGY** Conflict Management Coaching on a one-on-one basis and many clients were able to resolve their conflicts this way without further intervention. The cases that were not initially resolved with that process moved on to Facilitation and Mediation. Coaching was used again in those circumstances - this time to prepare parties to participate in those processes. Essentially, the **CINERGY** Conflict Management Coaching acted as a prism which split the right/wrong spectrum of conflict into a rainbow of opportunities for resolution.

Whether in the one-on-one process or, for pre-mediation coaching the **CINERGY** methodology is a gentle, supportive and self-generating process. The approach is innovative in managing conflict as the person's journey starts with a specific goal. They also reflect on what happened for them and what led to the dispute - deconstructing what occurred and reconstructing a way forward. People being coached similarly, reflect on the situation from the other's point of view including that person's values and beliefs so that they gain an understanding why that person acted or reacted in the way they did.

What else occurs within this process - that increases peoples' understanding of their interpersonal disputes and grounds the impetus to better manage them - is that the model facilitates clients' insights that enable them to explore the situation more reflectively including how they contributed to it:

*'Insights are those moments of clarity when something suddenly makes sense ... it's seeing the same of thinking a completely new way.'*⁴

Importantly, those being coached gain an understanding about how they themselves and the other person might now interact - to be able to change the pattern of their dynamic. This process gives people back control of their lives when they felt helpless and hopeless that things might change.

We have found that not only does this conflict management coaching process act effectively as a complete intervention in its own right, it is highly effective, as mentioned above, as a first step to prepare people for a further resolution process like mediation. In these cases, in which pre-mediation coaching is utilized, mediations become smoother, shorter, more comfortable and allow people to dig deeper into their inner selves to resolve

⁴ C. Noble, Conflict Management Coaching: The **CINERGY**© Model (**CINERGY**© Coaching 2012) 29.

their problems being already aligned to their own goals and the position of the other person through coaching.

For individual coaching or for each party to a mediation, conflict coaching has numerous practical implications for how conflict might be better managed within organizations. This is evidenced in following examples of the types of results commonly reported (by Cinnie Noble, founder of the **CINERGY** process):

'To talk to my co-worker about a matter before going to our boss. To see how I can stop the ongoing tension I am experiencing with my co-worker about the disagreement we had. To stop avoiding a difficult conversation I have to have with my staff member. To mend a relationship that is having a negative impact on my work. To not act defensively with my manager.' ⁵

Pilot Findings

The NSW study showed clear differences between the results for conventional and ADR methods of managing conflict. Reviewing 203 cases over 18 months showed that conventionally managed cases cost an average of ten times that of the ADR managed cases and took around 20 times longer in face-to-face hours. The time span required to deal with conventionally managed cases was six times that of the ADR managed cases.

Conclusion

Clearly the argument in time and cost for implementing ADR – conflict coaching mediation - is persuasive. More research will determine the long-term impact of potentially recalcitrant behaviour and enduring quality of outcome. However anecdotal input is showing that conventionally managed cases lead to unresolved conflict and *'repeat offenders'* whilst ADR resolution changes the relationship of the people and hence, provides a more stable and engaged workforce.

Conflict does not have to be destructive. In fact, it can be a dynamic and creative force in a team leading to a third dimension of quality and performance and a more enriching work experience. Conflict is always with us and it is not productive or realistic to think that we can remove conflict from our lives. The answer is to creatively manage conflict through tools such as **CINERGY** Conflict Management Coaching for, as Dorothy Thompson has said:

*'Peace is not the absence of Conflict but the creative use of processes to manage conflict'*⁶

Noelene Salmon

Based in Sydney Australia, Noelene has 20 years' experience in senior Human Resources and Industrial Relations and for the last 10 years has focused on Alternative Dispute Resolution. She has Master's Degrees in Employee Relations and Alternative Dispute Resolution and is an accredited Mediator and **CINERGY** Certified Conflict Management Coach and accredited trainer. Noelene has worked extensively in government and introduced ADR and workplace

⁵ Ibid 35,111.

⁶ Dorothy Thompson Time Magazine

training programs relating to Team communication, Managing Conflict and resolving issues with toxic teams. She has worked as a Conciliator for the Fair Work Commission and has experience appearing before State and Federal tribunals. Noelene works for NSW Health and also provides services as a Facilitator and Mediator through her company Good Outcome *Mediation and Conflict Resolution*.