

Conflict Management Coaching: The Back Story

Conflict management coaching is a distinct, one-on-one dispute resolution process that works with individuals who want to more effectively engage in interpersonal disputes. With the support of an ally (the coach), clients identify and work towards their own particular goals in relation to conflicts that are most relevant to them—issues in workplaces, family business, marriages, and other contexts. The process may be used proactively or remedially—before, during, or after an overt dispute arises—and can also prepare people to participate in mediation.

Today, many dispute resolution practitioners associate conflict management coaching with a Canadian named Cinnie Noble. In 1999, Cinnie, who has a background in both social work, law and mediation, independently developed this specialized type of coaching. Hers is a seven-stage model that moves clients along a continuum from where they are to where they want to be in handling conflict. Cinnie has taught and applied her model in the workplaces of public, private and non-profit organizations around the world, and in other contexts.

How did Cinnie Noble develop conflict management coaching as a specialty and turn it into a viable dispute resolution practice? What prompted her to do so? At the journal's request, Cinnie provided us with the backstory.

—the Editors

In the 1990s when I was providing family mediation, I decided to broaden my focus to include workplace conflict and began to generate more work in that area. As a candidate for a Master of Laws in Dispute Resolution, I also did my practicum and some papers on workplace-related conflict. Over time, I noticed that ADR was missing a process for working with people one-on-one to strengthen their conflict competence. Many incidents led me to this insight.

One day, for instance, when I attended a workplace to conduct a mediation, I ran into a person who had taken part in mediation on a previous occasion. We stopped for a brief chat, and he said that while he was happy with the outcome of the process, he sensed that the other participant was now a bit “cool” and had questioned why he had gone to the manager and HR instead of speaking to her directly. “I had wanted to talk to her directly,” he said to

me, “but, frankly, I don’t like conflict. I thought my manager might help. When it went to HR, it felt like a bigger deal than it needed to be.” Then he added, “I really don’t have the tools to manage conflict!” That stuck with me.

On another occasion, I conducted a workplace investigation where three employees had filed a complaint about their boss with HR, yet when I interviewed all twelve employees in the unit, everyone praised that boss. The problem seemed to be around the fact that the boss avoided conflict and, when questioned, would get defensive, put things off, or made quick decisions without hearing people out—even though he had attended conflict management training a year earlier when this situation first came to light. So, again, I observed that a workplace could be disrupted by someone’s inability to manage conflict effectively.

These were but two of the many



**CINNIE NOBLE, LL.B., LL.M. (DR),
C.MED**

Cinnie Noble is a Chartered Mediator and Professional Certified Coach, and pioneer of conflict management coaching. She and her international team train mediators and others worldwide in her unique CINERGY® Model. Cinnie is the author of [Conflict Mastery: Questions to Guide You](#) and [Conflict Management Coaching: The CINERGY™ Model](#) www.cinergycoaching.com.

incidents that showed me that one-on-one work was missing and that training, whether it related to conflict management, difficult conversations, or communications, wasn’t sufficient to transform peoples’ idiosyncratic ways of being in conflict to the extent necessary to actually shift their habits, attitudes, and behaviours.

Hearing about and researching executive coaching was a pivotal turning point for me. I ultimately became certified in accordance with the accreditation requirements of the International Coaching Federation. But there was no speciality related to conflict management at that time, so I began to research how to develop a model that was specific to supporting individuals in their efforts to become conflict competent or to specifically improve how they manage certain types of people and situations that were challenges for them. I really wasn’t sure what to do or how to create an effective

model, but I began the journey nevertheless.

I started with the basic framework for coaching models which is sometimes referred to as “coaching the gap.” That is, the client has objectives about what they want to be, achieve, or change, and the gap from where they are to where they want to be is where coaching work is focused. The wisdom is that clients need to gain increased awareness that shifts their thinking and opens up different perspectives before being able to consider options and actions that might take them where they want to go. I aimed to incorporate this thinking into a conflict-specific form of coaching.

Ultimately, I developed a seven-stage model, but I did not intend to prescribe a linear process, as coaching is generally fluid. However, I discovered that a staged approach that incrementally moves people along step by step works well to gradually shift from their initial mindset to one in which they are able to approach their conflicts in a more methodical way.

Acting on my intuition—without a specific idea of how this would unfold—I went to a number of organizations where I had been working as a mediator. I explained that I wanted to develop a coaching process to work with people

on a one-on-one basis in order to strengthen their skills and abilities to engage in and better handle conflict. I wanted to start with seven to ten people of various backgrounds (ethnic, cultural, age, gender status etc.). I asked the organizations whether, at no cost to them or the individuals, I could work with some of their staff for one hour a week over a six-week period, and then meet with everyone for a day to examine the results. Well! I had no trouble assembling my study groups and could easily have had 50 candidates.

The organizations I approached had plenty of conflict (as I knew) and were more than eager to find proactive ways to stop the problems in any way they could. A lot of money had gone in all to mediation and litigation.

The biggest initial challenge, and what seemed to me to be the central questions, was to figure out a way for people to gain different perspectives on their conflicts. I started by trying out my initial framework, and with everyone’s permission, took extensive notes and tapes.

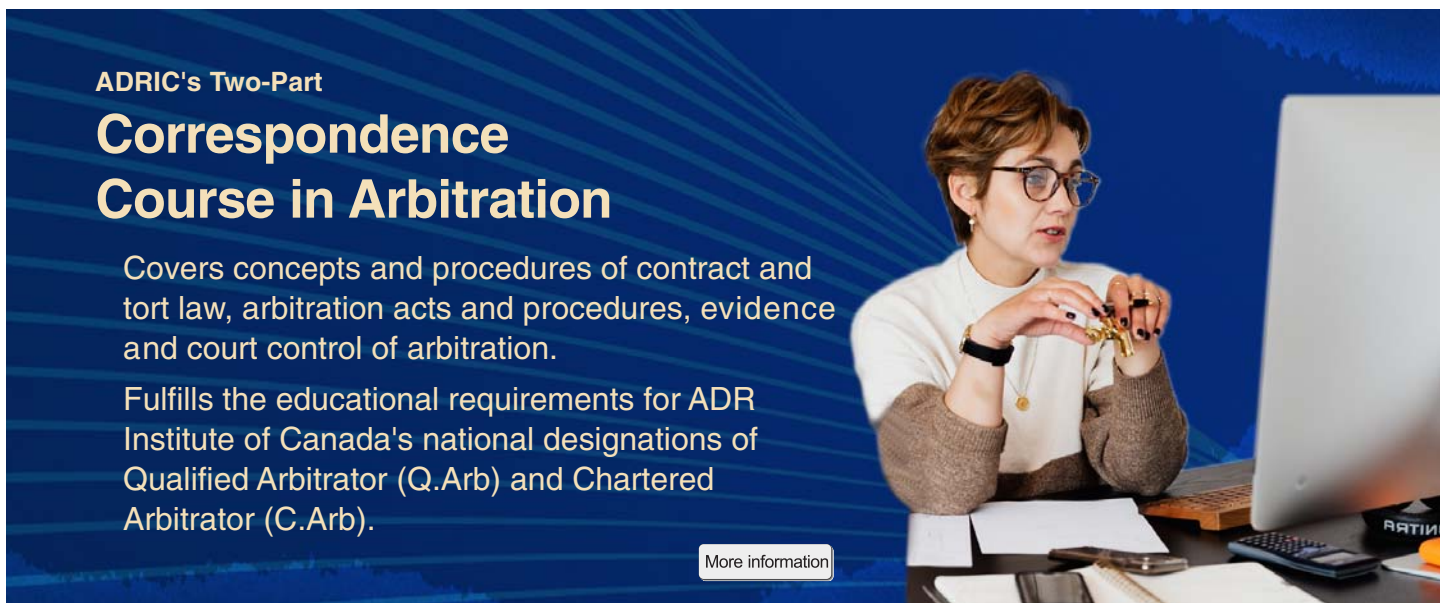
When I analyzed my material, I discovered some consistencies about how people related their conflict stories and what eventually moved them to problem-solving mindsets. I learned a great deal here about what I hadn’t real-

ized till later had to do with what was needed to shift from the emotional part of the brain to the reflective part in order to move from reaction to response. It was fascinating, and the framework was beginning to develop about ways to formulate the coaching process. This first “study group” helped me form the basis for the model I ultimately created.

Full of hope, I went back to those same organizations and others to see about working with more people on a no-cost basis to test what I was finding. The willingness to participate was amazing.

Eventually, this research—working with individuals and trying experientially different ways of coaching based on what I was learning—proceeded such that after a little over a year I evolved a seven-stage model that I chose to call “CINERGY,” a composite and riff on “energy,” “synergy,” and my first name. The model has seven steps, and the entire process can take six to seven hours, an hour at a time, less for some, more for others.

As a result of my research and my work I have learned so many things that distinguished the coaching process from mediation. Many practitioners say they already coach in preparing people for mediation and in caucus, and while that is likely a form of coaching, coach-



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ing principles and practices extend beyond that and are their own field of study and practice.

Over the years I have determined how to integrate conflict coaching into the mediation process. My mediation practice (mostly interpersonal workplace, estates, and family business disputes) has evolved such that I meet with each participant at least three times before they engage in mediation so that their ability to engage in the forum and “be” in conflict is more effective. That said, it took a while for me to convince clients in workplaces that each participant required up to three sessions before mediation! Now, it’s a given, but it wasn’t an easy sell. I think the DR field could do some work together too about what creative processes might be developed and in what areas so that the DR field, not the legal one, has more say.

I have come to see that different processes work for people differently, that not everyone wants to go to mediation anyway, and that being coached to be able to “be” in conflict with confidence and competence can provide durable skills for clients in contexts when they need them on an ongoing basis. Of course, not everyone is “coachable” or committed to being coached, and for them success and progress is limited. That said, most of my clients—even those referred to coaching—are committed to being a better version of themselves when it comes to engaging and managing conflict.

Twenty-five years ago, I ex-

pected to add conflict management coaching to my mediation practice. I hired a business coach to develop my goals and dreams and was able to concretely develop a plan of action that has ultimately evolved beyond my expectations. I didn’t dream about how it would develop until I realized that I offered a unique model that had wide application and that it interested coaches, mediators, and others. To date, I have accredited thirty people in total as trainers and coach-mentors who offer my training around the world.

My luckiest break was getting a contract as part of an integrated conflict management system for the Transportation Security Administration (a Division of Homeland Security) to develop a peer conflict management coaching program early on in my coaching career. It was an amazing experience. I travelled to Washington, DC and other parts of the United States over a five-year period (starting shortly after 9/11). I worked with an incredible team as we trained many people to provide conflict coaching to front-line staff at airports across the country.

Most of my international clients are ex-pats (from Canada and the USA) moving to parts of the world where they have challenges adapting and communicating with people in their workplaces in the countries they moved to resulting in conflict. These folks look for coaches to help, and a Google search has resulted in many engagements. Then, once I started training outside Toronto, I

was often asked to speak to local business leaders and others (by whomever retained me to do the training) . That has also resulted in a surge of clients over time. For years, I have been leading webinars or been asked to be part of panels, speak at conferences, or (now) participate in on-line events. Posting on LinkedIn and Twitter have resulted in some, but not many, clients and some, but not many, people for the workshops.

I have to admit that I find my coaching practice rewarding in so many ways. I have seen clients shift their conflict habits, gain confidence to “be” in conflict, embrace the positive possibilities... I could go on!

One case that comes to mind is of a man who was named a leader in an organization. He struggled to manage conflict among his staff of eight, and they rebuffed many of his attempts to communicate with them individually and as a group. The organization wanted to support him, and I was retained to work with him. His goal was to gain insights into what and how he manages himself in conflict situations (that lead to the complaints) and to gain confidence to address the concerns brought to him. Over a three-month period, he gained considerable insights on what he did and didn’t do in his interactions and worked on conversations with each staff member to speak to each individually. In the end he was successful in reaching his goals and when I checked in three months later, he was thriving! A wonderful conclusion! 🏠

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