Beyond mediation: how conflict coaching might help your practice

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In this post I want to reflect on how, as a mediator, I have learnt much from the related but independent conflict management process, called conflict coaching. Before I get onto my point, however, let me start by offering an explanation of conflict coaching:

Conflict coaching is a service provided by a conflict specialist to a person who is, or may in the future be, involved in conflict. According to the

CLARITY: Clear and clarify the conflict situation.

COMPASSION: Consideration of their own, and of the other person's, needs and goals.

CHOICE: Decide and evaluate their choices for moving forward.

CONFIDENCE: Develop conflict management skills so they can constructively engage in the conflict.

Conflict coaching can be used as a preventative tool to assist people to be more constructively manage conflict that might arise in the future. It can also be used to assist people currently experiencing conflict to manage it better. Where formal conflict management mechanisms are being considered or used such as formal complaints, mediations, investigations, litigation, conflict coaching is a role that can be used to assist people to prepare for such mechanisms. For example, by helping them to clearly define their expectations, to consider options and alternatives and to support them in preparing to participate in another conflict management process, conflict coaching can also be used to follow up on earlier investigations, litigations and other conflict management processes.

My journey to conflict coaching developed out of mediation work with multi-party disputes and also relate specific session mediations.

In my early disputes, I tried to get a lot of time in preliminary meetings with individual stakeholders or stakeholder groups - often there were multiple preliminary meetings with each stakeholder or party. Here I was spending a lot of time and effort with each, getting a sense of the dynamics of the conflict from their perspective, and assisting them to identify and articulate what was most important for them or prepare for negotiations with the other parties. If you think about this for a moment, it fits pretty neatly with the 5Cs of the PIR model referred to above.

In any case, when I discovered that a client wanted to spend one and a half hours with me to talk through their situation I cringed. Conflict coaching is an expensive process and I didn’t think this was a good use of our time. But the client was determined. And after all, they were paying for my time so I acquiesced. In the end, I came to see this as one of the best processes to develop my skills in conflict coaching.

Many of the skills I learnt in mediation are transferable to conflict coaching. However, conflict coaching is a more focused and intensive process than mediation. It also involves a longer-term commitment to helping someone develop their skills. Conflict coaching is often used to prepare individuals or teams for conflict management processes.

In between sessions numerous opportunities emerged to help one or the other partner develop the confidence and competence to engage in their conflict in a constructive way. For example, one partner wanted to work on how to present their case better in mediation. Another partner wanted to improve their communication skills. Yet another wanted to work on how to engage the other in what would likely be a difficult conversation or negotiation about their conflict.

In my mediation work with individuals who were being asked to participate in mediation sessions, I would often work in a preliminary meeting to help them develop their case and their language. This would typically involve helping them to identify their interests and needs, and to prepare to participate in a mediation. This is consistent with the conflict coaching model referred to above.

The principles underlying conflict coaching are consistent with those of mediation and mediators draw upon conflict coaching skills to enhance their own repertoire of process interventions and skills. At the same time, conflict coaching is a separate and distinct process with its own theory, systems, strategies and skills.

Mediation and conflict coaching feature:

• clarifying a person’s case
• gaining clarity about their situation
• supporting them to make an informed decision about how they want to proceed
• competence

I am not suggesting that there is a one-to-one relationship between conflict coaching and mediation. There are many differences between the two processes. However, there are some overlaps and the two processes do complement each other.

In summary, conflict coaching is a process that can help people to prepare for conflict management processes, to manage conflict more effectively, and to develop the skills necessary to engage in a conflict in a constructive way.

Conflict coaching aims to help people to engage in conflict in a constructive way. It involves helping people to understand their own needs and the needs of others, to identify their interests and needs, and to develop the skills necessary to engage in a conflict in a constructive way.

Conflict coaching offers mediators a systematic approach to consulting in-depth preliminary and follow-up sessions with stakeholders, as well as to prepare individuals for mediation. It also offers mediators and clients an opportunity to work one-on-one with clients independently of the mediation process and to coach them in a more effectively engage in their own conflicts.