Beyond mediation: how conflict coaching might help your practice

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In this posting I want to reflect on how, as a mediator, I’ve learnt much from the related but independent conflict management process, called conflict coaching. Before I get onto my current position, 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 ICA Code of Ethics, coaches assist clients to develop the five Cs:

• CONFIDENCE: Develop confidence about managing conflict and achieving their goals.
• CHOICES: Identify and evaluate their choices for moving forward;
• COMPREHENSION: Understand their own, and the other person’s, needs and goals;
• DEVELOP: Develop the confidence and competence to engage in their conflict in a constructive way. For example, one partner really wanted to work on her skills in having difficult conversations. Another, for whom English was a second language, felt that he needed help in finding an effective, direct and business-like communication style that did not offend others. Yet another was not sure about whether or not she wanted to remain in the partnership and was most open to her in relation to leaving the partnership or staying. These were all opportunities to engage in conflict coaching.

Conflict coaching has an overall objective of conflict coaching.

In multi-party disputes, I tend to use a lot of time in preliminary meetings with individual stakeholders or stakeholder groups – often there were multiple preliminary meeting with each stakeholder or party. Here time was spent developing rapport and trust with each party, getting a sense of the dynamics of the conflict from their perspective, and assisting them to identify and articulate what’s most important for them to prepare for negotiations with the other parties. If you think about this for a moment, it fits pretty neatly with the five Cs of the ICA conflict coaching model referred to above. Essentially I was using preliminary meetings to help parties:

• Make sense of their situation;
• See the bigger picture - in terms of their needs and wants;
• Work together to define their research.
• Develop the confidence and competence to engage in negotiations with the other parties to the conflict.

When I started out mediating, I practised a single session model – in other words you mediate until it’s done, whether it takes 1 hour or 3 days. Then, as one day an organisational client requested a mediation and a half hour mediation. I explained that I didn’t think it was enough time to deal with the conflict and the numerous people involved in it. The conversation went back and forth, until I finally realised that what they (a professional partnership with eight partners) envisaged resembling something on a stage 'lock' - every week or every fortnight. After some more conflict coaching, I agreed. In truth, it was one of the best decisions I ever made, and I have certainly opened to up to one and a half hour session - a story for another blog. More than that though, and unbeknownst to me at the time, there were new opportunities for conflict coaching.

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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 really wanted to work on her skills in having difficult conversations. Another, for whom English was a second language, felt that he needed help in finding an effective, direct and business-like communication style that did not offend others. Yet another was not sure about whether or not she wanted to remain in the partnership and was most open to her in relation to leaving the partnership or staying. These were all opportunities to engage in conflict coaching.

Here’s a story that I wanted to tell. It happened at a time in a company office – full of walls and boxes. One party was Jonathan, who worked in the IT department in a company who were involved in a dispute with an external supplier. The dispute was over the implementation of a new database system, which had been promised on time and on budget. The dispute was not just about the money, but the impact on the company’s business. Jonathan was very concerned about the impact on his team and the company’s reputation. He had been a key player in the project, and he was worried about how the dispute might affect his job and the future of the project. Jonathan was asked to meet with the external supplier to discuss the dispute. He was not sure how to engage in the negotiation, and he seemed to lack confidence. He was not sure how to communicate effectively, and he was concerned about how to handle the negotiation. He was feeling very anxious and uncertain, and he was not sure how to approach the external supplier. Jonathan was referred to conflict coaching.

Conflict coaching offers a systematic approach to conflictuning in depth preliminary and follow-up private sessions with individual parties, as well as private sessions within mediation. It also offers mediators and clients the opportunity to work one-on-one with clients independently of the mediation process and to coach them to more effectively engage in their own conflicts.

The principles underpinning conflict coaching are consistent with those of mediation and mediators draw on how to engage the other in what would likely be a difficult conversation or negotiation about their conflict. Jonathan was very concerned about the impact on his team and the company’s reputation. He had been a key player in the project, and he was worried about how the dispute might affect his job and the future of the project. Jonathan was asked to meet with the external supplier to discuss the dispute. He was not sure how to engage in the negotiation, and he seemed to lack confidence. He was not sure how to communicate effectively, and he was concerned about how to handle the negotiation. He was feeling very anxious and uncertain, and he was not sure how to approach the external supplier. Jonathan was referred to conflict coaching.

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