

## **Conflict Management Coaching – Taking Personal Responsibility for Resolving Conflict**

**Mary Rafferty,**

In this paper I will give an overview of Conflict Management Coaching, focusing in particular on the CINERGY™ model, which was developed by Cinnie Noble, a Canadian lawyer-mediator, conflict management practitioner and certified coach. A number of the unique features of the CINERGY™ coaching model will be outlined and why they are effective in supporting individuals to develop more effective conflict management skills. Some of the applications of conflict management coaching will then be explored.

### **Background and Definitions**

Conflict Management Coaching, often referred to simply as Conflict Coaching, has emerged as a specific niche in the coaching field over the past fifteen or so years, and has its genesis in both the fields of executive coaching and conflict resolution practice. The need to support leaders dealing with conflict inspired development of executive coaching approaches to managing conflict. Equally, conflict resolution practitioners and mediators were seeking a process that would assist where only one of the parties to a dispute were seeking support. As a formal process, conflict coaching initially emerged in campus mediation programs in the mid-nineties (Macquarie University, Australia, Temple University, Pennsylvania, U.S.) where it continues to be used more frequently than mediation (Ross & Brinkert, 2008).

In terms of definitions, CINERGY™ Conflict Management Coaching is a structured process whereby a trained coach works with the client on a one-to-one basis to develop or enhance their skills and knowledge in order to engage in and manage interpersonal conflict more effectively. Coaching can be on specific disputes that clients might be trying to prevent or manage. Clients may also want to explore how to improve their behaviours and reactions in conflict situations at a more general level. It is important to be clear that coaching differs from other interventions such as therapy/counselling, consulting and training in a number of important ways. Coaching focuses on assisting clients to take an action- and solution-focused approach to develop and improve an aspect of their lives. It does not aim to heal unresolved past issues or dysfunctions, unlike therapy or counselling. Neither does it purport to provide expertise such as advice or coach-generated suggestions as to what might work best, in contrast to what a consultant or trainer might offer. Coaching, according to the International Coaching Federation is “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. Coaching honours the client as the expert in his/her life and work and believes that every client is creative, resourceful, and whole” (International Coaching Federation, 2011).

### **Key aspects of CINERGY™ Conflict Management Coaching**

The first stage in the model is to ‘clarify the goal’ – this being the client’s goals for the coaching intervention. Borrowed from the field of sports psychology, goal setting is a key feature of coaching. Research supports the effectiveness of goal-setting has on performance, anxiety levels and self-confidence. Helping clients construct positive expectations for their coaching experience can also impact on the outcome and ensure that it is more positive for the client – “clarifying their desires and intentions” (p.176, Rock & Page, 2009). As the coaching progresses, the coach also uses the

client's goals to keep them on track and it is a clear barometer of whether the coaching is effective for the client or not. Essentially, the client is facilitated to be accountable and responsible for the outcomes of the process, but based on criteria that they themselves have set.

The next stages of the model facilitate the exploration of the client's situation and experience of conflict. There is ample evidence that one of the greatest needs of people in conflict is an opportunity to 'tell their story' or 'vent'. It is, however, important that this storytelling is done in a particular way. For example, research shows that continuing to focus on the anger a person has experienced, far from reducing the anger, actually increases it (Bushman, 2001). In the CINERGY™ Conflict Management Coaching model, the coach uses a structured approach to facilitate the client examine elements of conflict that have been found to commonly constitute a habitual pattern of reacting to conflict. These elements emerged during the research and development phase of this coaching model. The process of exploring their conflict pattern draws on findings in the field of neuroscience around the value of naming and labelling aspects of the experience such as the emotions, cognitive interpretations and assumptions in addition to identifying often unconscious filters such as values and beliefs that underpin these (Rock & Page, 2009). Research illustrates how this process of cognitively reappraising the situation has the effect of activating the rational and thinking part of the brain – the pre-frontal cortex - and deactivating the amygdala, the part of the brain that drives fight or flight behaviour (Ochsner, 2001, cited in Rock & Page, 2009). So the client is facilitated to talk through their situation in a way that actively supports more effective processing of the events that took place. They also acquire important insights, knowledge and self-awareness around their own patterns of reactivity in conflict that can then be used to help them set goals for change. Clients frequently comment "I have talked through this situation with a lot of people but I have never quite seen it like this before".

A further key aspect of helping a client to explore their conflict situation is the critical importance of helping them develop an understanding of the other party's perspective on the situation. The CINERGY™ model refers to this as the concept of mutuality. Having gained insights into their own conflict patterns, the client is facilitated to explore the situation from the viewpoint of the other party. This gives the client the opportunity, in the context of a non-judgemental and supportive coaching relationship, to reflect objectively on the other person's conflict patterns and gain some insights into how they themselves might have contributed to the conflict dynamic.

Another hallmark of coaching and the CINERGY™ coaching model is what Whitworth et al (1998) describe as curious or powerful questions. In contrast to the more common experience of questions to elicit information, curious questions aim to prompt personal exploration, introspection and foster insight and creativity. Compare for example questions such as 'where did it happen', 'what did you do then' with 'what did John's behaviour challenge about what you needed from this working relationship' or 'what assumptions do you think John made about you when you did...'. In coaching, the aim is to take the client 'not just with their brains, but with their heart, soul and intuition, into places that are familiar but seen with new eyes and places they may not have looked before' (Whitworth et al, 1998, p.69). This reflects the International Coaching Federation context for coaching – that the client already has the appropriate answers and the resources within themselves (to come up with these). Encouraging the client to find the answer within themselves and generate their own learning builds the client's sense of confidence and trust in themselves and embeds the learning at an experiential level. This is also in keeping with one of the key principles of andragogy

or adult learning i.e. that learning is most effective when it is self-directed and autonomous and occurs in a context of a supportive empathic relationship such as coaching, rather than one where the learner is deferring to another's expertise.

### **Applications of Conflict Management Coaching**

As outlined above, a key starting point for this area of practice was the need for interventions in situations where mediation requiring participation from two or more parties to a conflict was not working. So one application of Conflict Management Coaching is as an intervention, where for a number of reasons, mediation may not be appropriate or possible. In fact, in my own practice with clients trying to deal with a difficult situation, I would frequently recommend coaching as a preliminary step to mediation. One of the main reasons for this is that in coaching, the client is empowered to take responsibility for managing the situation on their own. Furthermore, coaching engages clients in a developmental process whereby the focus is on building their own self-awareness and acquiring insights and practical skills that foster growth, self-acceptance and new learning. As well as this, in practice, it tends to be easier to engage one client in a Conflict Management Coaching intervention as opposed to engaging both parties in the more formal intervention of mediation.

Conflict management coaching can also be a very effective support for individuals who are or have engaged in a mediation process. In terms of preparation for mediation, the reconstructing stage of the CINERGY™ model, offers the client an opportunity to rehearse in meticulous detail how they want to approach the situation. They also get feedback from the coach during the session – based on criteria they themselves have identified - not the coach: for example (coach to client) “You had said Anne that you wanted to come across as assertive and clear – but in your rehearsal just now, your tone was very quiet and tentative rather than assertive”.

As an intervention following mediation, it can provide critical support to parties in developing new ways of dealing with conflict to help them implement their agreement. A recent client who engaged in both pre- and post-mediation coaching commented “it transformed my experience from helpless victim into active participant.”

One of the most effective uses of conflict management coaching is that of preventing or de-escalating destructive conflict. This might be in the form of preparing for ‘difficult conversations’, for example a manager engaging in a performance management review with an employee or a parent having to discuss an issue with their teenage child. In organisations, it can firstly be a part of a change management programme or secondly, a skill development and support programme around conflict competencies for staff and managers. One client I worked with whose tendency to react quite hot-headedly towards his boss managed to transform his approach in just two sessions. The lightbulb moment for him was my question “what choices do you have about how you respond here” as he had harboured a belief that hot-temper was something he had no control over, yet when he thought about it, with his children, no amount of provocation ever upset him.

As conflict practitioners will attest, dealing with conflict in our lives can be a hugely transformational process and an opportunity for personal growth. Conflict cannot be avoided and to quote Richard Rohr, “if we do not transform our pain, we will surely transmit it”. Conflict Management Coaching is a powerful tool in starting this process.

## References

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## Mary Rafferty: Biography

Mary is an accredited Mediator and Certified Coach and Certified Conflict Management Coach has trained and coached in conflict-related areas in a wide range of organizations and workplaces. In private practice since 2006, Mary brings her experience from two previous professional careers - education and social work - to a field she is passionate about - helping people to find ways towards greater harmony in their relationships at work and at home.

Mary is an accredited Practitioner Mediator with the Mediators Institute Ireland (M.I.I.), Ireland's only non-profit professional association for certification and registration of mediators. Mary also holds certification with the International Mediation Institute and lectures on the Workplace Mediation Module on the M.A. in Dispute Resolution in Independent Colleges.

Mary is certified in the internationally renowned and innovative CINERGY™ Conflict Management Coaching Model. She is also a member of the international team of Approved CINERGY™ trainers and has delivered the signature 4-day Conflict Management Coaching Programme both in Ireland and abroad. Mary also runs an M.I.I. Approved Mediation Training Programme to Certified Level. Consensus Mediation is a registered Open College Network training centre.

Mary is a Director of the Mediators' Institute of Ireland. As Chairperson of the M.I.I. Conference Committee she has played a leading role in organising the annual M.I.I. national mediation conferences since 2008. Mary is also a member of the M.I.I. Ethics and Standards Committee and a member of the Employee Assistance Professionals Association, Ireland. Mary also holds a Fetac Level 6 Coaching Certificate, an Honours Degree in Education, a Masters Degree with Distinction in Social Science and has attended a wide variety of specialised trainings in the field of conflict resolution.