

Coaching managers through their conflicts



Managers create the consciousness of the organisation and conflicts cloud this consciousness. Many managers are responding to increasing work pressures and the conflicts these spawn by turning to coaches for support, says Tim Roberts.

There is mounting concern that unqualified and inexperienced coaches are mishandling issues of conflict. Dangerous consequences of this are that the client's development is compromised and harm is caused to individuals, teams and organisations. The damage caused can last long after the coaching has ended and may prove costly to correct, if it can be

corrected at all. These concerns are echoed in several studies including the Harvard Business Review (June 2002).

Unless coaches have a rigorous understanding of conflict (check for qualifications) they are just as easily deceived by the hidden dynamics of conflict. This is the blind leading the blind.

Conflict is the most personal and

expensive problem in the workplace. A coach skilled in transforming conflict is worth their weight in gold because:

- Unless people understand conflict dynamics success will at best be random - or lacking;
- Managers spend 40% to 90% of their time dealing with conflicts in one form or another;
- Unresolved conflict is a factor in at least 50% of resignations;
- The cost of replacing just one employee is usually more than their yearly salary.

Senior HR executives spend up to 20% of their time in litigation activities, most of them revolving around conflict.

Conflict transformation is a

growing field that generates self-awareness as well as raising skill levels, is truly empowering and the perfect compliment to a coaching approach. Conflict transformation allows participants to step beyond what has been traditionally thought possible because it offers the potential for a vertical shift (transformation) as opposed to just a horizontal shift (command and control).

Coaching, at the cutting edge, is about allowing managers the time and safe space to question their purpose, reactions and to skillfully support them as they craft new connections with their potential and with others. Coaching for conflict transformation takes this further by exploring those vital yet hidden intra-organisational and inter-organisational meanings. General results at the end of coaching programmes are increased happiness, higher motivation and satisfaction, a new assuredness in quality decision-making and an enhanced ability to motivate colleagues and deal usefully with all manner of conflicts that were previously incapacitating.

But why is this form of coaching growing in popularity? The reason lies in the failure of traditional hierarchical systems to satisfy many of today's manager's needs. Command and control is mechanistic and can all too easily create a consciousness that is restricted by fear - especially the fear of deadlines and the fear of failure. In conflict terms, fear is the chief immobiliser. It creates 'stuckness', it breeds inertia and enforces the status quo and fuels conflicts. The majority of people in such organisations do not say what they mean, and do not do what they say. They are carrying burdens of fear and resentment. A Gallup study from 2003 found that on average 16% of workers are actively spreading dissatisfaction. This costs organisations a fortune!

Case study - Jerry

Jerry was an experienced and capable manager brought in to oversee the complex information transfer between four specialist teams. Current

information transfers were disastrous. Jerry had to fix this. Jerry found it hard to manage the teams, many of whose members had been in post for years. When he tried to intervene, defensiveness and resentment spread like wildfire and compromised the efficiency of a high profile pilot scheme that the organisation was

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investing heavily in.

Out of his depth, Jerry spoke with his mentor who advised a 'get tough' approach. Jerry conscientiously tried this and later said, "I worked myself up for weeks about having to confront the team leaders. I got knots in my stomach and felt nauseous and angry that it had come to this. I kept up the tough guy approach for weeks, but it just caused more resentment and nearly burnt me out!" Nothing changed. Jerry's line manager then became involved and she hinted that Jerry would be better employed elsewhere if he couldn't solve these conflicts. If team relationships were rocky before they were now in a state of turmoil. This worsened over the next couple of months.

Finally Jerry heard about some coaching I was doing around organisational conflicts and asked to meet. The philosophy of coaching that I follow is that the client has the potential to have all the resources to succeed. It's my job to become their 'humble servant' and through questions and activities reflect their thoughts back to them so that they crack the conflict code in question and rediscover success. I also help them to navigate key transition points in the conflicts and help them to maintain themselves over the typical 28 day wilderness experience as they try to forge new working and personal practices.

For this I always use

professional development through reflective action learning.

For the first coaching session Jerry wanted to examine his reaction to the advice to get tough. He also recognised that this was something he wasn't very good at and he didn't want to become good at it! He realised that he came across as disingenuous, desperate and brittle when he tried to be tough. He described himself as "sounding like a loser with a megaphone." No wonder this alienated his teams even more.

During that session Jerry hit one of those deep 'Aha!' moments. He realised that he had started to threaten people with covert ultimatums and these had started to erode his integrity. He was mirroring the demands his line managers were making towards him. He felt furious with the misplaced advice his mentor had given. He was also angry that the culture of his organisation leapt from insecurity to aggression so quickly.

This is a classic manifestation of ignorance in the face of conflicts. We are so socialised into believing that in conflicts such as Jerry's, we need to dominate the other side. In addition there is a compulsion to blame and even to seek vengeance in a number of shadowy and subtle ways. This

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them how they felt about the redesign. Jerry said this was the first time his organisation had surveyed emotions. It all paid off. The information transfer between four specialist teams started to work. He was able to change his people management style to pay attention to this new learning and made full use of a maintenance programme based on reflective-action learning, to purposefully channel his experience, thereby further developing his insight and management capabilities. Staff morale also rose.

My style of coaching helps people to actually capitalise on their existing conflicts and to prevent damaging future conflicts. Our interactions embrace many things, including EQ, which is characterised by trust, feelings, contact, fairness, awareness, asking and pulling together. EQ in the extreme is about helping people create their own potential in the spirit of unity, which raises productivity, innovation, and creativity, strengthens relationships, reduces absenteeism and increases satisfaction. This approach is synergistic and cooperative rather than exploitative. This management style encourages the taking of responsibility and rekindles pride in work and the organisation.

merely produces hidden or open resistance in others and is expensive. Brick wall, head and bang come to mind!

The biggest breakthrough came in a later session. We explored the organisational conflicts and Jerry took part in activities to empathise with the team leaders, which he found quite emotionally draining – but it worked. Sometimes a solution shows itself with a metaphorical

‘Fear breeds inertia, enforces the status quo and fuels conflicts’

trumpet fanfare. In Jerry’s case this fanfare was the biggest brightest smile I had ever seen him smile. He stopped and we shook hands. “I know it” he said “I know it now!” Jerry’s breakthrough was to take his empathising and ‘pour’ this experience with a simple yet profound model I call ‘affect/effect’. It is a reversal of the norm in organisations. Normally people create

systems based on ‘effect’, the cognitive purpose and expected results of a particular process. This is generally IQ led and often deficient in EQ (emotional intelligence). Research shows this EQ deficiency to be a potential disaster. Such systems have a ripple effect on the emotions of those who use them. They breed conflicts. This leads into the ‘affect’ in the model. I suggest, that with precision guidance, it is more sustainable and efficient to build systems and processes by examining the ‘affect’ first, or at least, simultaneously. If people experience positive emotions when they use systems they will be better motivated, less defensive and aggressive, and their communication will be open. Resistance, hostility and sabotage are less because the whole shebang doesn’t feel bad – it all feels good!

Jerry was convinced that a redesign of the system with ‘affect’ in mind was the key. He had developed sufficient insight to know what to do and how to identify and transform the conflict dynamics. Later, Jerry went further. He confidently sought out each team leader to check with



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