

Leadership Skill in Promoting Productive Engagement Conflict Intervention Employing a Coaching Model

Don R. Swanson, EdD

Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ
dswanson@monmouth.edu

Abstract

Leaders in contemporary organizations work to foster positive engagement among their members. They often face unexpected episodes of disruption stemming from interpersonal conflict between persons who work in their unit. A nature outcome of engagement is conflict that needs to be managed. Most conflict episodes don't appear to be so serious that they require the intervention and expense of formal dispute resolution procedures. Consequently a leader must attempt to coach each of the parties individually in an effort to manage the ongoing situation. Leaders should be trained to conduct conflict coaching. This essay overviews the employment of a one-on-one coaching model that focuses on the essential dimensions that are relevant in each conflict coaching intervention. A group of thirty one human resource managers, who took a seminar on this topic with the author, were surveyed to determine the relevancy of the model, the efficacy of the concepts, and the ease of launching the approach. Several case studies, drawn from actual cases, are employed to illustrate concepts and applications.

Introduction

Leaders constantly search for means to increase employee engagement. There are numerous definitions of this popular phrase, and a working definition is "The employee's sense of purpose and focused energy that is evident to others through the display of personal initiative, adaptability, effort and persistence directed toward the organization's goals" (Macey, et. al 2009, 8). Positive engagement is disrupted when there is interpersonal conflict between persons who work in their unit. Disruption is an apt symbol to represent the impact of conflict on most organizations. All organizations will report that they have periodic "trouble," "distraction," "commotion," "disturbance," or perhaps organizational "disorder" "interruption," or "interference" that impacts the organization's mission. These are all common synonyms for "disruption" and seem to be listed in an order that demonstrates a continuum from what disruptions might normally be expected to occur in human relations, escalating to what becomes a serious concern for management. Conflict can take many forms and it is conflicts the terms describe. "Conflicts are part of human consciousness in all aspects of life" (Aula & Siira, 2010,

125). It is inevitable that some conflict will occur. “To work in an organization is to be in conflict. To take advantage of joint work requires conflict management” (Tjosvold, 2008, 19). It has been estimated that it consumes 20 percent of employees’ time (Song, Dyer and Thieme, 2006)

An organization has to be willing to invest in human awareness and improvement in order to promote productive engagement. Conflict management is not a simplistic process of specifying right and wrong and making an edict that all members must adhere to the right path. This prescriptive “distributive justice” philosophy underlies the method specified in many employee handbooks and corporate policy manuals. But disruptive disagreements can take on multiple forms and rarely correspond to the notion of “conflict resolution” that is a common label for organizational programs. Individuals generally carry a substantial residue of old conflicts with them into their future interactions. This author’s preferred term is “conflict management.” Disputes are made manageable, never completely resolved. There are complex features beyond the immediate task issues; history of the conflict participant that has established values and expectations, their personal and professional identity, the emotion in the situation, the power dynamics, and their ability to vision a better situation. The precursors to conflict are in the minds of participants and can be infinite and difficult to anticipate. Research on the antecedents to conflict indicates that changing demands such as pressure to increase productivity, incorporate new and diverse personnel following mergers, trim the workforce, and meet difficult deadlines; all contribute to a climate of stress and increased conflict between organization members. However evolving conflict resolution systems in organizations attempt to anticipate common sorts of structural struggles over resources, and issues that reflect policy. Lipsky and Seeber (2006) note these as “proactive, strategic” approaches. But these approaches are often inadequate in dealing with some types of disruptive struggles between organization members. The leader often does not have the option of proposing formal third party involvement, such as mediation, because frequently the parties to the dispute don’t agree to participate and/or the resources to conduct the mediation are not available.

Ultimately the first point of contact in any disruptive struggle is the leader who the parties are responsible to. Executive leaders are valued first as individuals who bring superior qualities to a position and secondly for the ability to work with and influence a team. Consistent exceptional performance is the key to success. Executives are responsible for bringing an appropriate set of attributes, values and behaviors to their accomplishment of difficult tasks. It is often the leader’s responsibility to effectively deal with the counterproductive interaction of the parties to ongoing disputes. The metaphorical phrase “the leader as coach” has become popular in some organizational culture settings. Coaching is an established feature of performance development in many American corporations. The need for a leader to be a competent coach is evident. The ideal leader coach has extensive communication coaching and performance evaluation experience coupled with a substantial ability to motivate and foster attitude adjustment. Leaders are expected to be coaches, and they should be trained to conduct conflict

coaching. This essay overviews the employment of a one-on-one coaching model that focuses on the essential dimensions that are relevant in almost every conflict coaching intervention.

The CCCM Comprehensive Conflict Coaching Model

Within the setting of the CCCM a coach and a disputant communicate face to face, in a confidential setting in order to develop a deeper understanding of the conflict and to consider interaction strategies and interaction skills.

The Comprehensive Conflict Coaching model (CCCM) (Brinkert, 2006; Jones & Brinkert, (2008) is comprehensive in that it integrates conflict communication research and theory from multiple disciplines and can be applied to a wide range of conflict situations. This model is built on systems and social constructionist (Gergen, 1999) foundations. It emphasizes the communication aspect of conflict (Folger & Jones, 1994), especially the way in which narratives are used to structure meaning and action (Kellett & Dalton, 2001). The CCCM is meant to be adaptable for coach, client, and context. It is designed to combine coach facilitation and expertise (Brinkert, 2009, 67).

This model is intended to be flexible and adaptable for coach, client, and context. It does require coach facilitation, knowledge of the model and expertise in some key communication skills. The coach must be both an accurate and active listener. The active listener is capable of employing open –ended questions in order to support the coachee and the multiple features of context, constraints and freedom. The relation of identity to emotion and power is examined as these perspectives are intertwined. Power is considered as a feature of relationships, roles, goals, and how it is negotiated with others.

The CCCM includes a pre-coaching conversation, the administration of the Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument, four typically sequential stages, and a parallel process (Jones & Brinkert, 2008). The initial phase of the CCCM process is to have a conversation between coach and client in which the process phases are described and basic ground rules are set forth and agreement to by both parties. Then the process begins with *Stage 1: Discovering the Story* in which the client articulates their initial story and the coach listens very carefully to consider the narrative coherence and fidelity. Subsequently the coach suggests that the client expand the story with more detail, and as a consequence a discussion ensues to refine and test the story.

Stage 2: Exploring Three Perspectives explores the story with the coachee with the perspectives of identity, emotion and power. These perspectives are significant in a variety of discipline's conflict research literature and practice. They are elements found in all conflict interactions. Emotion is explored with the distinctions of cognitive, physiological and expressive emotion and the impact of emotion on conflict. Identity is examined with the concept of "face," and how the coachee's identity is relevant to an understanding of the dispute. Power's relationship to identity and emotion is essential to understand. The key assumptions about power is that it is always relational, and is influenced and enacted through organization, social, and cultural structures, and is to some extent negotiable.

Stage 3: Crafting the Best Story is an opportunity to vision the future, free of the current difficulties in order to develop a positive vision of what the situation can become. The approach

of this stage embraces both visioning and the basic positive approach of Appreciative Inquiry to assist the coachee to develop concepts about ways to understand and possibly take action in their perceived conflict situation. This element is important because trust, respect, and a resultant lack of defensiveness and openness are essential for this process to be successful. As the founders of the process indicate:

The coach should never advocate one particular perspective or course of action for the client, as the client must maintain fundamental control and responsibility. In addition, the CCCM is intended to complement existing organizational dispute systems. Despite its potentially wide applicability, it is certainly not the right process for every conflict situation (Brinkert, 2009, 68).

This stage includes the coach taking a more active role in eliciting critical refinement of the future story; but it is still largely the creation of the person.

Stage 4: Enacting the Best Story considers what is possible to do to “live the best story in interaction with others.” This changes the focus from “what is” to “what can be.” In this process the coachee may discover areas of skill improvement that are desirable or necessary in order to enact the future story. Major routes or methods for living the new story might include how to listen actively and appreciate understanding of others, including the use of conflict styles. The Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument results are usually accessible because of the use of it at the beginning of the coaching. How various persons in the conflict employ behavioral conflict styles can be very important, as are the ability to employ a range of successful communication skills, including the ability to confront, confirm, comprehend, and negotiate, and to adapt to the communication styles of others from different cultural backgrounds. These communication skills are a focus because the “parallel process” is comprised of constant feedback, reflection, assessment, goal setting, and learning transfer. This process lays the basis for continued coaching where necessary.

Cases drawn from Executive Coaching Experience

Executive coaching seeks to provide assistance to an executive leader to both better understand themselves within the professional environment they are in, and assist them to vision improvements. “The popularity of executive coaching is most likely driven by the twin forces of turbulent organizational environments and the heightened criticality of effective leadership” (Bassi, Cheney, and Lewis, 1998, p. 53). Over many years of executive coaching the author has come to realize that what I am really doing is “conflict coaching.” Often the motivation for an executive getting a coach is that they are experiencing, fomenting or maintaining a disruptive experience with one or more others in their organization. It seems obvious to agree with the notion and believe that the proficient coach must know how to promote change based on sound theory and methods (Caudron, 1996, Gabriel, 1996).

Personal reflection on many of this executive coach’s executive coaching assignments may illustrate how key elements of the CCCM could assist in establishing a coaching focus that is efficient and provides some significant insights for the coachee. Each of four cases are included here in very concise form. The cases are intended to briefly illustrate how the CCCM can bring form to the deliberations. Although the author was the coach in each situation, it can

be speculated the coachee's immediate superior could have assisted the individual if that leader's portfolio and skills included doing some conflict coaching capability.

Case 1 Alan

Alan was a 40 year old executive, in charge of software acquisition and software rollout for large investment bank. He had been in the current position for a year.

Narrative: The obvious issue was pushback from managers of more than 500 regional and local offices objecting to the rollout and application of new purchasing software. The task of the executive was to convince the managers that the advantages of adopting the new software outweighed their objections. Alan's superiors did not understand why it was taking so long to get a nationwide rollout of the newly selected software that was intended to streamline the purchasing process and make it more efficient than the old system where each manager had to sign off on all purchases, no matter how small.

Identity: a varied career spanning fifteen years at various positions in three investment organizations. His favorite postings were overseas in Hong Kong and Singapore. He also liked working in Boston better than working on Wall Street. He was an African American male who was quite proud of his professional accomplishments. Alan was promoted regularly. He often wondered if his African American race had an impact on the way others in the very white banking environment viewed him. He did not want to be thought of as an "affirmative action" token executive. Alan had a variety of interests, distinct from the interests of many of his peers who report to the same Director. They liked pro football and Alan liked opera for example.

Emotion: Alan experienced a number of frustrations that he worked to hide from his peers. He was frustrated with the project which he thought should be viewed as forthright, reasonable and practical based on the factual elements of the new software. Alan had frustration with his direct reports who sometimes seemed distant. Alan was frustrated with his boss, who he saw as a member of the good old boy society in the firm, and he hadn't found a way to develop a better relationship with him.

Power: Alan supposedly had a talented and a solid team, but guessed that some doubted his ability to represent their interests. He had questions about how much power his Director was willing to give him to modify his projects to fit the situation. Alan thought this was evident in how he was treated in regular meetings with the Director and his several direct reports, where he seemed to be left out of the banter and periphery conversations. He didn't think he was in an equal position of power with this peer group.

New narrative: The first element of conflict coaching was to prompt Alan to meet the project problem directly and change the narrative. He had to get himself and his team to empathize with the local and regional managers who were rejecting the new software and to address the illogical, emotional reasons they were doing so. The new narrative included: involving his team's insight into the problem, establishing a new rhetorical approach, and a new timeline for the rollout. This new narrative dealt with his leadership of the issue, and provided a method of bonding more directly with the team. In terms of Alan's new personal narrative it was important in helping him to focus on positive accomplishments, and the positive challenges of the task at hand. Alan began accepting the sense that he would never have a close personal relationship with his Director, and this caused him to begin to vision ways of conducting himself

in interactions with his boss that demonstrated his interest in new ways. In fact he found that a commonality of being Notre Dame alums was a shared bond.

Case 2 Roger

This is the case of Roger a 50 year old paraplegic executive in charge of a unit that handles a range of mutual fund projects for a large investment bank

Narrative: The issue was satisfying his new younger boss who wanted to be sure that they were wringing every ounce of productivity out of the unit and increasing the quality of the unit's performance. Roger suspected that his boss (Joseph) was more interested in looking like a future CEO than on some of the issues he constantly nitpicked. It seemed that Joseph was the sort of overassertive type of leader who relished his position power. Roger was constantly fearful of how his identity impacted the situation and wondered if Joseph had plans to fire him. Conversely Joseph was concerned that Roger worked such long hours and so hard, that he was going to burn out, and wanted him to take a vacation break to decompress and reflect. Roger had resisted the vacation and relished the sense that he was a tireless worker.

Identity: Roger had a long and very successful career with the banking organization. People liked and trusted him. He was proud of his reputation as fair and honest, as someone who could be trusted. He was generally known as a workaholic. He did not want his disability status to impact his professional identity.

Emotion: Roger had strong feelings regarding his disability and constant concern that it would be seen as a sign of weakness. He believed that for someone in his leadership position the strength of leadership was shown through performance and results.

Power: Roger's power came from his reputation as someone who was diligent, careful, yet understood when problems arose. His power with his direct reports came from the sense of trust that had been established.

New narrative: In a sense the task was to build upon what seemed to the coach to be a generally positive narrative, and to help Roger think through the various elements of his personal narrative. A focus became building his pride in his accomplishments and his rise to the position he was in leading a very large and important group in the bank. Roger's desired narrative had always been to have people overlook his disability. It became apparent that fear of what his identity was, and fear of being seen as not energetic enough, needed to be pushed to the periphery and he needed to learn to emphasize the positives of his daily work life, of which there were many.

In this case coach and client built a narrative that fits most executive level positions, i.e., that job security often comes from making your boss look good and so instead of constantly being in fear of Joseph, he began to listen more carefully to Joseph to sense what was really in Joseph's forcefulness and assertiveness in wielding his power.

Case 3 Susan

Susan is a 36 year old VP in a very large investment bank where she is in charge of a unit that provides customer service and support to the firm's high wealth clients.

Narrative: Susan asked for an executive coach, as a perk of her position, to work through some potential conflict issues of importance to her. Susan had a record of more than a decade of increasingly responsible service to the investment bank. She was confident of her competence and the performance of her unit. Susan described her concerns as those of her personal identity with her boss and the managers who directly report to her. She wanted to be considered a strong leader, as good as any man in the firm. She had some difficulty understanding the perspectives of some of her direct report supervisors. They were all in their mid to late 20's and seem to see the unit's working environment, the firm culture, and appropriate interaction patterns differently than she did. She wanted to be taken seriously as she is responsible for the development of these young managers.

Identity: Identity is a very important issue for her. She is quite sensitive to any comment or slight that might indicate she is being dealt with differently because she is a woman. Susan is also sensitive to being thought of as old and out of touch.

Emotion: Susan experienced strong emotion around the personal identity issue. She remembers an occasion, years ago, when she teared up in front of her current Director. She did not feel it is appropriate to demonstrate such emotion.

Power: Susan believes that power is based on perception as well as performance. She detests the perception that women are not as focused on task as men and that women should not be promoted as readily as men.

New narrative: The coach and client focused on what should be the appropriate narrative of her professional life. There were concerns with how her status as a married mother of two small children should be communicated. She feared it would be seen as an impediment, so we focused on the positives of family life that enable a broader empathy for mistakes and the learning of humane professionalism. The coaching focused significantly on having Susan refine the narrative of her identity. For example she felt that to be seen as strong, she had to compete in the unit softball game at their annual retreat. She was frustrated in not being able to be as successful in the game as her younger direct reports who treated her like an "old lady." We envisioned more satisfying methods of responding to a situation such as this.

Case 4 David

David is a 37 year old VP, Director of Diversity, in a large investment bank.

Narrative: David held two positions while I served as his executive coach. He was an executive in human resources who was initially recruited to the investment bank as the Director of Recruitment. He later was moved to the position of Director of Diversity. David was somewhat unsure of why he was moved from the recruitment position to the diversity position. He found the diversity position a bit perplexing because it was ill defined and he did not have a clear sense of power and authority within the organization. In his position as Director of Diversity he found that new initiatives required convincing a range of constituencies about the appropriateness of the initiative. As a result many issues he wanted to confront were delayed. David was acutely aware of seeming like a poster boy for diversity. He did not appreciate this as in his previous positions he had always felt that the color of his skin made no difference.

Identity: David was accustomed to being in a position of authority. He was a former Army officer who had experience running a large package express facility at one of the nation's busiest airports. He was an African American, who had supervised a lot of minorities in his position with the package express company. He was very aware that he was essentially under a spotlight at the investment bank because he was an African American, and it was widely realized that more minorities needed to be brought into the firm to take executive positions. He felt that he should see his role as that of advocate for a stronger inclusion of minorities at the firm.

Emotion: David was not a person who comfortably demonstrated emotion or found it easy to talk about emotion. It was essential in the coaching process to get David to explore how he felt about the professional journey he had made. He felt a strong sense of pride being in the position he was in.

Power: In other positions in his professional life, David had always felt secure in his position power to provide authority for elements of direction and decision making. Now he was in a position where his power needed to derive respect from the people he dealt with, and the mission he was pursuing. This power was more dependent upon his advocacy ability.

New narrative: Much of the narrative refinement focused on the issue of who David felt he was in the position he was in. We were working with uncertainty reduction, yet defining new perspectives constantly. David suspected that the narrative of how the firm saw him and his role, and how he saw himself and his role, were different. He needed to define his identity in a manner that was satisfying to him, and he was largely capable of doing that. In the process he learned more flexibility and the skill of listening more closely to the reactions of many people in many parts of the firm. He slowly began to develop colleagues' broad sense of respect for his ideas, decisions and actions within the firm.

Human Resource Managers Reactions to CCCM

In October of 2011 the author conducted a full day of training on conflict coaching for SHRM accreditation credit for human resource professionals. 31 HR professionals from a wide range of types of organizations attended. They learned the CCCM Comprehensive Conflict Coaching model. Following the training they were surveyed to gather their reactions to the subject matter of the training. Four basic subjective questions were asked: 1) What is your basic reaction? How valuable is this conflict management approach? 2) How does this approach to conflict resolution compare to the system your organization employs? 3) How might this approach be employed in your organization? The last portion of the training seminar also included these issues and their questions and discussion.

The written responses to the initial question indicated that the trainees found the CCCM model to hold substantial value for them personally and was a promising approach. They reacted: "it focuses upon the key elements that are present in all conflicts," and "it's an approach that is clear and understandable." "Most of the conflicts that are a problem are relation conflicts and this helps us understand them." They also felt that the inclusion of the Thomas Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument was a big plus. "The conflict styles approach should appeal to a lot of people."

The second question asked for a comparison to the conflict systems in place in their organization. HR managers consistently felt it was a more “personal” or “person” oriented approach that added to ADR (alternative dispute resolution) options. It appears that they were referring to the sense that the CCCM dealt with interpersonal issues to a greater degree than their existing systems which tended to deal with structural issues and task issues. Existing systems in most organizations focused on legally defined concerns, appropriate protections for employees, and methods of dealing with distributive justice in situations of discord. “This system (CCCM) has the chance to change the people involved.” This could be interpreted to mean that this is a “transformative” conflict process not unlike the approach practiced by devotees to the “transformative mediation” approach. This transformative approach stands in clear divergence from the “distributive” approach of many legally defined or legally mandated approaches, such as court appointed mediation (Bush and Folger, 2005). The key distinction of CCCM is that it can be employed as an informal process, practiced as the two parties to the examination of the conflict decide to approach the situation they are focusing on. The CCCM model prompts an examination of several aspects through the familiar conscious recognition of narratives.

The third question focused on the practicality of the approach. The HR managers acknowledged that this approach was distinct from mediation. “It allows us to use mediation principles without having to get multiple approvals to hold a formal mediation.” Often the formal process, mandated by organizational policies, appears to be too time consuming and expensive. Conflict coaching, since it springs from executive coaching practice, is much easier for an HR manager to justify and fund. The participants in the SHRM seminar were very curious about various ways in which the CCCM model had been employed in different settings. To them a strong appeal was that it could be taught to supervisors and they could be expected to employ it when necessary. Some pondered an important issue that relates to the training of managers as conflict coaches, “how well do they need to be trained to understand the model in order to do good and not harm?”

Conclusion

The experience discussed in this essay illustrates positive experiences with the application and training of the CCCM, the Comprehensive Conflict Coaching Model. Readers who want a clear and comprehensive understanding of the model should refer to the Jones and Brinkert (2008) text that is listed in the reference section. My coaching and training experience, which extends far beyond the experiences discussed here, demonstrates that the model seems to be expedient because it is a flexible model that can be used as one on one mediation, as a conscious approach to conflict coaching, as an informal schematic for an executive coach to apply, or as a formal or informal tool for leaders who often deal with difficult supervision issues. The author has worked to facilitate the application of the model in all of these situations and has found in each case some elements of stage 2 of the model are powerfully relevant to some situations and not to others. Thus it seems that the model provides a sort of toolbox for the coach, yet has a consistent schema built around the nature and concepts of narrative framing. The personal narrative focus of this experience corresponds to Wallenfelsz and Hample’s (2010) findings that persons often “take conflict personally” and may productively “use imagined interactions to work through a conflict situation.” It also prompts a sense that there are important links between conflict management research and practice, as Roloff (2009) explains based on his extensive experience and research.

There are some caveats to be considered with the application of the model. As the HR managers indicated there are concerns with how to roll out the functioning of the model. Utilization requires that CCCM synchronizes with existing dispute systems in place in organizations and organization cultures. There may well be some corporate cultures where application of this transformative model of conflict resolution is unlikely to succeed. For example an organization accustomed to adversarial grievance and dispute resolution systems. The model almost certainly holds probability of success only when the coach has the requisite facilitation and listening skill. Those elements, while essential, are given slight explanation in this essay. The parallel process that takes place in the CCCM inhere the need for a facilitative coach to have personal qualities of empathy, ethical concern for the other and the process, the communication skills of active objective listening, and ability to pose open-ended questions that stimulate joint deliberation. A desired result of CCCM training is the coach's learning of communication research and theory-related perspectives that may assist the client in their introspection.

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