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Navigating Conflict in the Workplace

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In a meeting at your school, you feel that you have been personally attacked. What do you do?

One critical skill that you require as a Principal and Vice-Principal is the ability to navigate conflict.

Conflict resolution and mediation skills help you navigate the **end result** of the conflict: the aftermath of the disagreement, the hurt feelings, the harm, or the breakdown in team communication.

Conflict resolution and mediation skills do little to identify the root causes, and without some work at determining **the beginning**, conflicts will continue to repeat themselves in the workplace. This is where the skills of a conflict coach may help you bridge the gap.

What is a conflict coach?

A conflict coach helps you examine the nature of a specific conflict. They help you unpack the strategies you currently use, and then support you in building and adding skills that will improve your conflict resilience.

Instead of focusing on the external problem, a conflict coach will help you identify your own recurring patterns to get to the root of the conflict. This will help you manage the repeated conflicts with the people and/or circumstances that happen over-and-over again. You may find that you are attracting the same cycle of conflicts in your workplace or in your personal life.

It is no accident that you keep attracting a romantic partner that is controlling or have friction with a certain kind of leadership style. These conflicts are external conditions that invite self-examination.

There are two parts to the conflict coaching process:

Part One

Conflict is an inside job. The first step is for the coach to help you identify your internal triggers when conflict arises, and learn what happens in your physiology and how you respond. Engaging in this self-assessment can help you to avoid recurring conflicts.

Part Two

Conflict coaches will then help you build a map to work on your conflict profile. These are strategies you will use to manage conflict successfully, including how you speak, how you engage, how you initiate, and how you address a conflict conversation.

A valuable takeaway from conflict coaching is the personal reflection as well as an understanding that you are participating in creating this conflict. You are not a victim but are somehow engaged in a familiar cycle that needs to be interrupted.

Conflict coaching helps eliminate some of the fears and worries that you might unknowingly be working to protect. You will learn skills and practices that help you to prepare and rehearse, and to build a clear action plan to reduce the frequency and impact of conflict as you move towards success.

You don't have to have a conflict coach to begin the process. Here are some strategies and reflections to try on your own:

1. What You Remember About Your Feelings BEFORE the Conflict:

What was happening just before the conflict? How were you feeling? The answers to these questions provide a context, and help you to see the 'set-up' that often takes place prior to a conflict.

For example:

Just before the conflict I was settling into my office getting ready to start my workday. I had a busy schedule of meetings and sessions, and wanted to have everything ready. I was not expecting the conversation.

2. What Happened?

Outline the facts in point form. This sounds like an easy thing to do, but it may be challenging to stick to the facts. Write down the clear sequence of what happened.

For example:

- *I walked into the room.*
- *The supervisor was waiting for me.*
- *Her arms and legs were crossed.*
- *She said, 'I need to talk to you about your comments at the previous staff meeting'.*

Those are the **facts**. When we begin to write down our **experience** of what happened, it becomes intertwined with our feelings and assumptions. I might be tempted to add that, *I walked into my room and was unexpectedly ambushed by my supervisor, who was in an aggressive attack mode*. The ambush, aggression, and attack are my perceived experience, but not a factual reckoning.

As you will soon see, all conflicts are an echo or a reminder of something that has already happened in the past, and conflict coaching gives us an opportunity to both heal and to move forward with greater awareness, skill, compassion, and resilience. We are always striving towards resilience, towards the capacity to 'stay in the room' when difficult feelings and conversations arise.

3. What Could Have Been Said to Improve the Situation?

What would have helped you? What do you wish was said or done?

For example:

In an ideal world, what would have made this encounter better for you? Perhaps you wanted your supervisor to ask you questions and learn more about you and your work before they came to talk about all of their ideas.

Make the solution something you would be willing to follow yourself. In this case, are you willing to sit and listen to the supervisor's preferences and ideas, and find out what is important to them? This keeps you honest in your thoughts about what would work best.

Of course, this all takes **time**, a fragile resource for school administrators who are constantly working with moving timelines. What we don't think about is the amount of time and energy that unresolved conflict can take up in our bodies, minds, and spirits. Investing time in front-loading the work of managing conflict pays long-term dividends for your whole self.

Resources: Free resources and a workbook are available on my [website](#)

To help find a conflict coach you can Google "conflict coaching" online. You can also find a listing of practitioners and mediators on:

Find a mediator: <https://www.mediatebc.com/find-a-mediator>

Mediation services in BC: <https://www.mediatebc.com/learn/conflict-resolution-options>

If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.