



Conflict Coaching

By Mia Forbes Pirie

Whether in the boardroom or bedroom, most people do not like conflict: and for good reason. Human beings are social in nature. Our brain circuitry is built to fit in with our group and to set off alarm bells when we deviate from it or may be excluded¹.

When involved in conflict people become deeply stressed and often depressed. This may be expected in the case of someone going through divorce or a marital breakdown, for example, but we might not recognise how stressful disciplinary procedures at work can be – or even being involved in corporate litigation.

Work does not stop because of a conflict situation. Emotions aside, the increased workload owing to the conflict can easily be underestimated. Additional time is often not allocated to the conflict situation. In performance related cases where an employee's work itself is under scrutiny, this stress will be exacerbated.

Under stress the body releases hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline. In addition to having negative health consequences, including weakening digestion and the immune system, it clouds thinking. A person's perception of danger and their reactivity are heightened. Their ability to see good intentions in people and to interpret actions

as conciliatory decreases. It becomes more difficult for them to evaluate risks rationally. This affects their ability to negotiate a dispute or come to a settlement.

This explains why mediation and facilitation can be so helpful. A neutral third party who is not personally affected by the issues can help clarify things. They can stay calm under fire and support parties in conflict. Mediators and facilitators can only go so far, however, as the cost of stress over extended periods of time will not be reversed at mediation. A good conflict coach can go further by helping a party in conflict over a longer period of time.

Conflict coaches should be a sounding board for clients to discuss potential options and support clients in dealing with difficult emotions and difficult people involved in the conflict; gaining perspective; seeing and considering their options clearly; and making effective and constructive decisions. After mediation a good conflict coach will be able to help repair broken relationships and avoid future conflict.

¹Louann Brizendine MD, neuroscientist and best-selling author, personal communication with the author.