

How could a 3-step coaching model help executives handle workplace conflict? (Sarah Hughes, 2019)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is safe to say, we cannot escape conflict in the workplace. However, high levels of relationship conflict have been associated with low productivity, job satisfaction and moral. Understanding how coaching can be an effective intervention for executives who are experiencing high levels of workplace conflict offers advantages to organisations and employees alike. The author of this study argues that a 3-step coaching model that develops self-awareness, empathy and conflict communication skills can have a positive impact on executives' productivity and wellbeing.

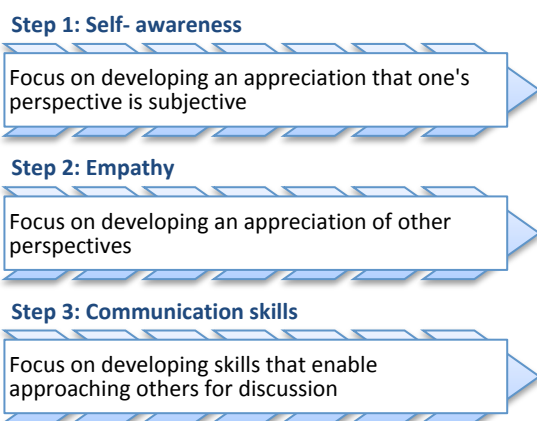
BACKGROUND

How does conflict manifest in the workplace?

- Research studies have identified 3 categories of workplace conflict:
 1. Task conflict (what should be done)
 2. Process conflict (how to do it)
 3. Relationship conflict (personality clash)
- Evidence from these studies has shown that moderate levels of task conflict can have a positive impact on team innovation, whereas relationship and process conflict produce negative outcomes
- Findings also suggest that approaching, rather than avoiding the other disputant is key in conflict resolution at work. This can be achieved through co-operation (attempting to satisfy another's concerns), and assertiveness (attempting to satisfy one's own concerns)

Can coaching help executives handle workplace conflict?

- So far research has produced little empirical evidence, or practical guidance to coaches working with executives experiencing conflict
- The author proposes a 3 step-coaching model to help executives handle conflict.



RESEARCH DESIGN -METHODOLOGY

The author used a reflective approach known as **Living Theory action research** that allowed her to test and improve a 3-step coaching model with the active involvement of study participants. In the first stage of the study the author/coach conducted 3 coaching sessions with 3 executives who were experiencing conflict at work. Further analysis of interview transcripts and participants' questionnaire responses was conducted in the second stage, via thematic analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

How did a 3-step coaching model contribute to conflict resolution?

Self – Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Coaching enabled executives to notice their own role in relationship conflict➤ Coaching helped executives challenge self-deception and accept their responsibility in producing conflict
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Other -Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Coaching increased executives’ awareness of their disputant’s feelings, which fostered greater respect ➤ Coaching made executives more empathetic and open to seeing others’ perspectives
Conflict communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Executives were introduced to a conflict communication model (SAYS) on how to approach the other disputant ➤ SAYS model: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Start: What’s your opening line? Reassure them of your good intentions ○ Ask: Ask how do they see the relationship. What can you do differently to help them? ○ Your perspective: Explain your perspective. Give specific examples ○ Steps forward – What would you like them to do to help you give your best? What will you do to help them give theirs?

What is the benefit of using coaching in conflict resolution?

Emotions	Self esteem	Avoidance and Approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Coaching helped executives manage their emotional reactions ▪ Coaching showed executives how their emotions drive conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Coaching boosted executives self-confidence ▪ Dealing effectively with relationship conflict improved executives’ self-worth and competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Coaching highlighted that avoidance prolonged conflict, and had a damaging effect on working relationships ▪ Coaching provided executives with tools (SAYS model) to successfully handle conflict at work

CONCLUSION

Executive coaches are often asked to support their clients in managing relationships and conflict in the working environment. It is therefore surprising that conflict resolution has not attracted much attention in coaching literature thus far. Even though mediation has been the traditionally ‘go to’ approach for conflict resolution, evidence suggests that it is not always successful and parties tend to use it as a last resort.

One of the advantages of the current study is that it offers good preliminary evidence that coaching can develop executives’ ability to handle workplace conflict successfully. Bearing in mind the significant impact that relationship conflict has on moral, productivity, and wellbeing this further expands the scope of coaching as an effective organisational intervention.

For executive coaches, the 3-step coaching model can be a useful addition to their toolkit. Online communication is known to trigger conflict, and as more executives work remotely or whilst travelling the conflict communication model (SAYS) can be beneficial in allowing them to act promptly and not be tempted to avoid difficult relationships. However, we also need to consider the rather small and homogenous composition of this study’s sample. Further research is certainly needed to determine whether similar results would be found in diverse populations, and non-corporate working environments.