

Conflict: the best feedback process there is!

By Liz Rivers

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Organisations grow by recruiting, retaining and developing talent. In order to develop, key performers need accurate and constructive feedback, which leads organisations to spend lots of money developing sophisticated feedback tools such as 360 degree processes. Consultants are engaged to develop models and staff trained to administer and debrief them. Getting accurate feedback that really pinpoints the development needs of key staff – current leaders and potential leaders of the future - is a major challenge. Often colleagues don't want to give straight feedback for fear of consequences, or lack the skill to do it effectively, or give it anonymously so that the candidate is left wondering who said it and what it relates to. The tools available are far from perfect.

In my opinion, conflict can be a powerful opportunity for feedback if the participants are supported to listen to the information and act on it. This requires a mediator who is skilled in both mediation **and** coaching.

Often, key members of the organisation are highly talented but have blind spots that can significantly hamper their progress. Our psyches go to a lot of trouble not to see these aspects of ourselves because hearing such feedback can be profoundly uncomfortable, but these areas can also be where the greatest breakthroughs in our professional development lie.

The "Johari Window" model explains this very well. The top right quadrant describes aspects of ourselves that others can see about us but we cannot see ourselves ("blind spots"). We are dependent on feedback from others to bring these aspects into our awareness.

Johari Window

	Known to self	Not known to self
Known to others	Open	Blind Spot
Not known to others	Hidden	Unknown

In conflict, two people are having a highly charged reaction to some aspect of each other. They are each holding up a mirror to each other and neither likes what they see, so rather than dealing with what is being shown to them, they are attacking the mirror or the person holding it. Their energy goes into defending themselves and saying why the mirror is wrong, rather than dealing with the information it provides. If you have a piece of cabbage on your teeth don't get angry with the person who takes the trouble to tell you!

Combining mediation and coaching

I work both as a workplace mediator and an executive coach. When mediating I use my mediation skills to help people drop their defensiveness and listen to what is being said to them. As a coach I can take this further and help them to use this information developmentally, rather than simply fixing the immediate issue which is arising with their colleague.

In a one-to-one coaching assignment I will meet the coaching client on their own, and to an extent I see the face that they choose to show me. To find out how they behave with others and how others react to them is more of a challenge. I can ask for feedback from others or do a 360 review but these have their limitations. In a mediation I can see much more clearly how people react to each other under pressure.

An example

In a recent mediation between Sarah, a line manager, and Joe, her direct report, I had a very powerful example of this. Their working relationship was on the verge of breakdown and when I met each of them separately it was clear they each saw themselves as the wronged party in the situation. When I brought them together to discuss the issues directly with each other certain behaviours which had not been apparent when I met them individually became very pronounced when they were in each other's presence. Sarah's body language when talking to Joe changed dramatically. She clenched her jaw and tilted her head back in a way that was appeared hostile. When I reflected back to her the change I had seen and the impact it had on me she was completely unaware of it. Joe, on the other hand, had a tendency to stop listening to what Sarah was saying, to interrupt and to start defending himself, rather than engaging with what Sarah was saying. Again, this was a reflex response he was unaware of until I reflected it back to him.

When each of them modified these behaviours it became much easier to discuss the issues between them and reach agreement on the way forward.

I then met with each of them privately some days later. They each acknowledged that others had given them similar feedback about these aspects of their behaviour but it was only in the intensity of the mediation that the feedback really hit home and they felt motivated to change. I worked with each of them as a coach to help them develop their self awareness around these behaviours and decide on strategies to change them. Sarah asked colleagues to give her feedback about her body language, especially when she was under pressure. Her leadership improved significantly as a result. Joe practiced continuing to listen even when he felt like defending himself, and his relationship not only with Sarah improved, but also with

his direct reports and with clients. He decided to teach the mediation model to his team as a problem solving tool as a way of embedding the learning for himself.

Lasting results

Six months on each has reported that their working relationship with the other has improved significantly, *and with colleagues and clients*. The organisation has retained and developed two valued members of staff rather than losing one or both of them, as would probably otherwise have been the case and they have each become better managers and team members as a result of the learning.

Mediation is often seen as remedial process to fix a problem, and used as a last resort before grievances, disciplinarys or exit are considered. Used skilfully and with a coaching mindset it can not only restore important working relationships but also be a powerful developmental tool as well.

(all names have been changed in this example)

Liz Rivers is a mediator and executive coach – for more information about her work see www.lizrivers.com