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## Ten Common Conflict Resolution Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

By Liz Bywater  
President of Bywater Consulting Group

One of the most common and frustrating impediments to worker productivity is conflict between employees. Unresolved conflict can strain relationships, create tension and negativity, and dampen morale.

Whether engaged in a heated debate, a disagreement, or an outright feud, take a strategic approach to resolving the problem. You'll be most effective if you avoid making these common mistakes.

1. Don't make assumptions about the situation or the other person's perceptions, motivations, or reactions. You'll get a much clearer and more accurate picture by asking the other person directly.
2. Don't take it personally - it rarely is!
3. Don't look for blame. Instead, try to identify cause.
4. Don't avoid the problem. It'll only get worse, breed resentment, and resurface at a later date. You've simply got to deal directly with the issue at hand.
5. Don't attack the other person's character. That's just playing dirty. It will not help you work things out and it will almost certainly have a lasting, negative impact.
6. Don't gossip about the problem or about the other person involved. It's unprofessional and will only make matters worse.
7. Don't bring it up in public. This is a private matter to be resolved between you and the other party.
8. Don't bring it up when there's not enough time to address it. Instead, leave adequate time for a thorough discussion - or introduce the issue and schedule a time to resume talks in the immediate future.
9. Don't bring it up when you're angry, stressed, or feeling ill. That's a disservice to you and the other person involved. Wait until you're calm.
10. Don't address the situation in an email. Email leaves far too much room for misinterpretation. While we're on the subject, don't copy others on a personal matter. This will almost certainly make the other party feel defensive, angry, or humiliated. It won't, however, help resolve the problem.

## Peer Conflict Coaching: Another Dispute Resolution Option

By Cinnie Noble

Conflict coaching is a concept that combines dispute resolution and coaching principles. It is a one-on-one confidential and voluntary process in which a coach works with an individual client to help resolve a dispute and to prevent a dispute. This may apply to a specific dispute the individual is or was involved in, or one which is anticipated. Conflict coaching is also used for people who want to gain new skills and enhance their existing ones, in general, for example, not as they necessarily pertain to a specific dispute.

Within some organizations, there is an increased use of one-on-one coaching by internal staff trained to provide coaching. Ombudsmen have been providing coaching assistance for many years and to varying extents, so have some other internals, such as human resource professionals. The thrust of this article is about peers coaching peers, within the workplace. The concept is consistent with the notion of building internal capacity and resolving disputes as close to the source as possible.

### Peer Conflict Coaching

Peer coaching may be used for many reasons and in many contexts, including conflict. Peer conflict coaching is a specific process in which staff members coach others at their same 'level'. That is, manager to manager, non-manager to non-manager. Peer conflict coaches have a number of functions. These may include, but are not limited, to the following:

- coaching a peer about a past unresolved dispute that continues to adversely affect him/her
- coaching a peer about a current workplace dispute or about preventing an unnecessary one
- coaching a peer to prepare for a workplace mediation
- coaching a peer post-mediation, with respect to any negative aftermath
- coaching a peer to prepare for an anticipated challenging conversation with another co-worker, manager, direct report, etc.
- providing emotional support and a confidential 'gear', regarding a dispute situation
- directing staff to relevant resources, policies and so on, that may be of assistance.

As with other dispute resolution processes within an integrated conflict management system, or as one of the Alternative Dispute Resolution programs offered in an organization, there are many variable factors to consider in the effective development of a peer conflict coaching program. The selection of coaches, their training, the parameters of their involvement, terms of confidentiality, ethical standards and so on, are all variables to be considered, in the development of such a service.

Conflict coaching is increasingly evolving as a major dispute resolution technique. The concept of peer conflict coaching will inevitably join the list of mechanisms available to organizations, in their efforts to prevent unnecessary disputes and assist staff members to effectively resolve conflict in the workplace. Not all staff chooses to have a third party mediator and the option of one-on-one assistance appeals to many. Being able to access internally trained coaches, who are also peers, has additional appeal for many people.

## Breach Allegations in non-EEO Settlement Agreements

### ***Dear Mediator:***

If a mediation agreement is reached in a non-EEO workplace dispute and a breach allegation is later raised, is there an official process in place to ensure compliance?

Answer:

Our take has been that an agreement is a contract between the agency and the employee. Therefore, it is subject to enforcement. Although there are no appeal rights to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in these situations, an ADR program can still investigate the action and recommend appropriate steps to address non-compliance when confirmed.

Guidance from EEOC regarding breach allegations in non-EEO ADR cases states that if a party believes that the other party has breached the settlement agreement, he/she should report the breach to the Chief Mediation Officer within 30 days of when the party knew or should have known of the alleged breach. The Chief Mediation Officer will investigate the allegation and, if appropriate, work with agency management to enforce the agreement.

See the following website: <http://www.eeoc.gov/federal/adr/resolvehandbook.html>

If you have a question for Dear Mediator, please submit via email to [WorkplaceADR@va.gov](mailto:WorkplaceADR@va.gov) and it may be answered in the next ADR Newsletter.



### **First Secretary's Diversity and Inclusion (ODI) and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Excellence Awards Ceremony Postponed**

The Secretary's first ODI and ADR Excellence Awards ceremony scheduled for October 20, 2009, has been postponed. The ceremony, joined together with the Office of Diversity and Inclusion will be the first awards of its kind. These awards recognize VA employees who have made exemplary accomplishments in the areas of diversity and inclusion management and in furthering VA's goals in the area of alternative dispute resolution.

The re-scheduled date for the ceremony will be announced in the near future.



## Workplace ADR Program

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#### **Mediation:**

***A Solution to Workplace Disputes***

The Workplace ADR Program solicits articles for VA's quarterly ADR newsletter. The purpose of the newsletter is to communicate information relating to the use of ADR in workplace disputes and serve as a resource for those interested in learning more about ADR and its application within VA. We invite you to submit ideas and articles for the newsletter through your respective administrations: VHA to Rita Reese (10A2E), VBA to Johnny Logan (20M2), NCA to Nicole Maldon (40A), VACO staff offices to your VACO ADR Liaison, and labor organizations to your ADR Council Representative. We are looking for ideas and articles on ADR-related topics, noteworthy activities, initiatives, accomplishments, best practices, or other items designed to educate and inform VA employees and managers on ADR and its benefits in addressing workplace disputes. We hope the VA community will find the newsletters a useful resource for obtaining interesting and helpful information representing ADR activity throughout VA. For more information, visit our website at:

<http://vaww1.va.gov/adr/page.cfm?pg=86>



## First Lady Michelle Obama thanks Veterans Affairs employees

First Lady Michelle Obama says that the work Department of Veterans Affairs employees are doing is "vital."

That was the message she delivered on Tuesday, October 20, 2009, during a visit to the department, her latest stop on a tour of the federal agencies.

From providing health care to helping service members and veterans buy homes, she told employees at the Washington headquarters that she and President Barack Obama are as proud of them as they are of the men and women serving in uniform.

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