

The development of a bespoke process to meet identified needs in education sector conflict

Confidentiality Statement

It is our intention to provide a sense of the background and context to this project to allow our colleagues and others working in areas where groups of individuals work together the opportunity for valuable learning whilst maintaining confidentiality of those involved. No specific reference will be made to the individuals or stakeholders involved either in this paper or in the presentation itself.

Concept

One of the stimulating aspects of working in the conflict resolution space is that there are a myriad of ways that we can use conflict management skills and combinations of processes to meet the specific needs of any group. Often in group situations such as the workplace, education, board rooms or community, there are decisions to be made, changes to be adapted to and differences of perspectives including things we may regard as “little niggles” which get in the way of smooth operation. To analyse this type of complex situation using a one size fits all or cookie cutter process approach reduces the potential for obtaining the best quality process and therefore outcome.

A more innovative approach that we use in this type of scenario, is to work with the stakeholders involved to ascertain what everyone needs and then to design a process combining a range of elements to meet the specific needs. This can involve one on one processes such as conflict coaching and communication/leadership coaching; small group processes such as mediation or facilitated problem solving, training and processes to address any overt or express conflict using a combination of small group or private sessions, mediation and restorative processes.

The case study we are presenting demonstrates the use of a number of these combinations to enable a group of professionals in the education space to find a harmonious way to continue to work together in a changed environment.

Background

Outline of conflict dynamics

The clients consisted of a group of approximately 40 specialist professionals within the education space who were experiencing difficulties in a number of areas which combined to create significant challenges for management and group uneasiness. There was acceptance from all the stakeholders involved that this was a very unsettled period and that the services of an appropriately skilled and experienced independent facilitator were needed to assist the group to move forward through the challenges.

Trust and relationships between the key stakeholders were recognised as being at a low ebb. Some issues identified seemed related to change, management practices, communication breakdown and ways of working. There was a real sense of frustration from many stakeholders of the current situation and its impact on the common goal to be highly performing and focused on the delivery of a high quality product to this sector. Other stated goals included:

- To build trust in relationships between all stakeholders
- To support effective ways of working together
- To develop effective strategies for identifying opportunities for positive change
- To support effective communication

Approach

We adopted a co-facilitation approach for a number of reasons:

- The process involved a number of sessions over several months and it ensured our ability to deliver as required;
- It allowed the opportunity to role model collaborative behaviour;
- To bounce ideas whilst maintaining confidentiality;
- A duo allowed us the ability to remain calm in the face of significant 'heat' in the room at times;
- Task sharing such as one monitoring conversation whilst the other captured content on whiteboard;
- To enable the use of processes which require two facilitators such as restorative circle work;
- To build relationships and manage a large group; and
- To take advantage of the additional skill base two practitioners can bring.

Information Gathering

We adopted a DSD (Dispute System Design) approach to design a bespoke series of processes for this situation. The group had already begun the process of communicating about what was needed in a group review and this was the springboard for us to develop an initial proposal. We were provided with background information in a document which summarised a recent reflection stemming from a group review. The document covered ideas as to what was currently working well, what could be done better and what were some next steps that the group wanted to achieve.

As part of this DSD, we created a draft outline for a series of modules which we proposed to deliver in two hour blocks over a period of several months. These modules were circulated and agreed to by all parties. We anticipated that the modules would require enhancement as the process evolved.

Delivery of modules

Introduction module

The first module was focused on the members of the group developing more understanding of themselves and each other. It was designed to enable the members of the group as a whole to feel safe, included and potentially to build relationships and trust with others.

The first step in the process was to build a group contract which set out the rules that people would follow throughout the process. This group contract was revisited at the commencement of each subsequent session.

One aspect of the first session was to break the large group into four sub-groups to discuss their communication and decision making needs. We used a short form personality test model as a quick and generalised method of creating the four groups. The benefit of this approach was that people who did not normally feel aligned found that they had things in common with others and that each person felt able to "have a voice". This process enabled some general communication and decision making needs to be identified for the group as a whole which were used as a platform for future sessions. It also provided a safe environment for individuals to express their concerns and a number of areas were identified:

- Some members of the group did not feel that the group as a whole was cohesive, some described 'in-group' behaviours, some felt excluded either by others in the group or by management;
- Communication was not working on a number of levels: for example, some members of the group felt that important decisions were being made without consultation, some managers felt undermined in their leadership roles, other people felt that they had lost the ability to discuss issues openly without fear of repercussions;
- A number of members of the group were concerned about the risk of loss of professionalism;
- A number of long serving members of the group had left in recent times, leaving a feeling of loss and grief which was currently unresolved;
- Some members described feeling unsafe at work;
- Problems had become personalised, adding to the feeling of friction.

As issues rose to the fore we adapted the modules or the timing of their delivery to meet the presenting needs of the group. Early on we identified that small group meetings were needed to spend time understanding how each person was experiencing the situation, what they felt they needed in order to find resolution and to build trust and rapport with each individual. To achieve this, we held confidential facilitated meetings with self-selected sub-groups from within the overall group. We then evaluated the design of the process to enable the needs identified to be met.

As a 'next step' we focused on how to build a sense of belonging to the overall group and we developed a module which we labelled 'team building'.

Team building module

This was a deliberately fun session with a focus on getting different members of the group to get to know each other more on a personal level. We started with a shared lunch and then included a variety of small group exercises, some of which were around the food itself and all of which were focused on group work. Our overall objective was for members of the group to see one another as colleagues with a similar set of professional values and as fellow humans.

To ensure continuity and to make the most of the sessions we also invited the participants to do work on their own between sessions. The homework from this session was a values exercise where we asked the participants to reflect on and list their 5 highest values. This exercise would both build on the work in the team building session and lay a platform for developing commonality and understanding in future sessions. A common theme in future sessions was to assist people to analyse their own world view and to gain understanding of others.

As the process evolved, we continued to seek feedback and to watch the dynamics of the group to identify what process would best fit the presenting needs. We reflected, evaluated and adapted after each session and worked to offer a responsive process that was in sync with the progress and development of the group.

Subsequent, whole group modules covered the following topics:

- **Communication skills:** This session involved a combination of training and facilitation of small groups to enable individuals to develop their own understanding of their individual communication needs as well as those of others. The session mixed communication theory and models with small group work where participants were charged with identifying their own communication style and needs and then analysing other's style and needs. This type

of learning allowed the group to self- identify that different styles and needs will inevitably clash unless there is understanding and gave us the opportunity to work with them to develop processes which met the needs of all. Some of the core differences were when information is needed, the level of information needed and the time required to make decisions. This culminated in agreed communication protocols for the group both for further sessions and in on-going working relationships.

- **Group Understanding:** A number of sessions were developed to assist participants to become aware of their own 'footprint'. We introduced concepts around values and culture and a variety of ways of grouping participants according to these concepts. Our goal was two-fold; first to assist parties to gain self-awareness and understanding of others and the other was to find a number of ways for the group to divide itself into sub-groups with something in common, thereby taking down the firm group delineations which had been creating rifts.
- **Consultation and Decision Making:** This session built on the work covered in earlier sessions and this seemed important as the group started to regain their confidence in themselves and each other to be able to work together towards common goals. To be able to discuss different methods and philosophies towards management styles and decision making in an objective way took away from a subjective assessment of current methods and of people's responses to them. This allowed the group to have very difficult conversations constructively.
- **Restorative circle process:** This session was offered as a way of providing an opportunity to focus on past hurt, gain understanding of the differing perspectives and give members of the group who chose to participate the opportunity to restore and/or rebuild a strong healthy working relationship. The session was attended by additional people from the umbrella management group which added to the sense of commitment. It was a really valuable session which we felt was pivotal in terms of the need which often can arise in conflict to look back and acknowledge perspectives before moving forward. The feedback from this session was very positive.
- **'Looking to the future':** The final group session focused on strategies and pathways to manage future change and challenge. It was designed to draw together the threads of the work of the past three months with added exercises designed to build a sense of hope and confidence. As with other sessions we built in elements of fun- including the use of household items as tools with which to work together with a cohesive vision into the future. One important aspect of this session was that individuals or small groups were empowered to offer to take responsibility for 'next steps' in terms of the future landscape and we left this project with the feeling that real progress had been made.

Challenges:

As the process developed we experienced a number of challenges that needed to be anticipated and avoided to ensure that we maintained the strong relationship of trust within the whole group. These challenges included the following:

- Avoiding being aligned with management while still offering support, this was particularly important as we had initially been approached by the umbrella 'employer' which was

perceived as being part of management and it was this entity which was paying for the process;

- Managing strongly influential participants who appeared to have their own agenda, as with most group situations there were some very strong personalities in the group some of whom had a clear agenda. Our focus was on developing a cohesive group which meant building rapport with these personalities while managing any potentially disruptive aspects;
- Offering a flexible process while still meeting the needs of those who were seeking certainty and needed consultation around any proposed addition to the process

Learning:

This process underlined some of the learning about processes and the value of offering a flexible, responsive approach. In particular we noted:

- Value of longitudinal work
- Value of on-going revision of what is needed for the group
- Ability to manage a set of individual needs alongside group needs
- Value of adding small “training” slots into facilitated discussions to enable members of the group to take an academic approach to issues.

Summary

The education space is ideal for this type of work because of the many and complex relationships: Education at all levels involves the interplay of professional and personal relationships and often generates strongly felt values and perspectives which can create conflict. The space offers opportunities to work with interpersonal relationships, group dynamics and change management in an exciting and challenging way.