



Conflict Coaching Fundamentals: Working With Conflict Stories

by Samantha Hardy



This summary is comprised of quotes from the book. The book has many helpful examples to show how this works in real life that are not included in this summary.

Human beings frequently create stories, even if information is limited or there is no story there. We invent one that provides some meaning to what may objectively be an abstract collection of phenomena.

The kinds of stories we tell ourselves about conflict typically have the attributes of conspiracy theories. They tend to connect real and imagined information into a form that seems coherent and emotionally satisfying. They blame others (the bad guy) for causing our suffering, and they lead us to believe that a certain kind of justice (usually based on the bad guy receiving his comeuppance) is right and available. The problem is, however, that these stories are not complete, they are not “true” for everyone involved, they are based on many assumptions, and they often make it more difficult to improve our situation by narrowing our thinking and our options.

2 genres of conflict stories:

The Melodrama and the Tragedy

The Melodrama:

A story with a sensational and improbable plot that focuses on the suffering of a main virtuous character at the hands of an evil villain. The plot focuses on actions, not character development, and virtue always wins over evil in the end. The genre is designed to elicit strong emotions from the audience and to leave the audience satisfied that justice has been done by the end of the story.

Any conflict in melodrama is between the characters, rather than internal. There are only two types of characters in melodrama – good characters and evil characters – and they are easily identifiable right from the start of the story. Good characters are sweet and kind and attractive, and bad characters are evil and scheming and ugly. Good characters demonstrate only virtuous conduct, and bad characters perform despicable actions. They never behave out of character.

4 Characters:

The Heroine: The heroine is the embodiment of virtue. She is as morally strong as she is physically fragile and weak. In the typical melodramatic plot, the heroine’s virtue is called into question by the villain and she experiences extreme suffering as a result. The heroine is dependent on the father figure to recognize her virtue, punish the villain, and restore the heroine to her rightful place (this is known as the father figure providing “dream justice”). Melodramatic heroines are acted upon rather than being active themselves. They respond to suffering with passivity. The innocent heroine under difficulty frequently succumbs to a melodramatic despair of the world and demonstrates a sense of the hopelessness of things...the heroine never actively attempts to solve the problem created by the villain. She simply resists by continuing to demonstrate her virtuous nature and waiting for other more authoritative characters to recognize it and rescue her.

The Villain: The villain...is the embodiment of evil. The villain's motives are always immoral: he is ambitious, greedy, jealous, or lustful. He covets something that he does not deserve. He pursues his desires with relentless single-mindedness. The villain usually proceeds in his plans with some clear advantage over the other characters (and particularly the heroine).

The motivation for his actions is usually portrayed as disproportionate to the quantity of the villainy unleashed. He may murder for a small amount of money, destroy an entire village because one resident has insulted him, or ruin an entire family because the daughter does not return his affections. This lack of proportion helps in his characterization as truly evil, because the less motivation can be demonstrated, the more the villain's actions appear volitional and unjustified.

Despite the villain's very active pursuit of his goals and the power base that he exploits for this purpose, in the end he always receives his comeuppance. Good always triumphs over evil.

The father figure: The father figure in melodrama is the person with primary responsibility or power to protect the heroine. He is often the heroine's actual father or guardian but may also be a larger scale patriarch such as a military ruler, a king, or a judge. It is the father figure who must actively recognize the heroine's innocence and virtue, punish the villain for his evil deeds, and put things right again. The father figure directs other characters to assist him in his task and is the final decision maker when the time comes for "dream justice" to be implemented. The heroine's destiny is ultimately in his hands.

The bumbling helper: The heroine...is often supported by a bumbling helper. He is virtuous and well-intentioned but practically useless. He is completely on the heroine's side (often he is her devoted and dependable sweetheart) and tends to make long speeches about the virtues of his beloved. He is generally a passive character, although when he does take action he is usually outwitted by the villain. The bumbling helper is confused and extraordinarily gullible, although his flaws are always forgiven because his heart is in the right place.

The melodramatic plot:

Classical melodramatic plots usually consist of three acts: the first demonstrates the good characters in a state of virtue and happiness; the second involves the "primal scene" in which this state comes under threat due to the actions of the villain; and the final act is the scene of the trial, in which virtue and vice are recognized, the villain gets his comeuppance, and virtue is rewarded ("dream justice" is achieved).

The focus on the evil villain and his actions provides a fictional certainty leading to the final dream justice. Dream justice involves a very public recognition of the heroine's virtue and the villain's moral failings. It is the stereotypical "happy ending" where the audience can enjoy the seductive pleasures of melodramatic wholeness without considering the effects on those outside the simplified narrative or acknowledging alternatives (Smith, 1973).

In melodrama, dream justice implements a return to the idealized past. The villain is presented as having upset the moral order, the way things should be, and dream justice restores the damage, punishes the villain, and allows life to continue as if the villain's actions had not occurred. Despite the comforting fantasy of dream justice, Nowell-Smith (1977) reminds us that "melodrama's happy end is often impossible, and, what is more, the audience knows it is impossible" (117). Dream justice is impossible for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is based on an overly simplistic and unrealistic version of events. Secondly, the past can never be fully restored nor the villain's actions entirely undone. The heroine has suffered, and at least the memory of that suffering remains.

Finally, a related problem with dream justice is that it focuses on restoring the status quo – there is no room for change, improvement, or growth. The audience is never encouraged to challenge or question the underlying social structures or contextual factors that have been repressed in the simplified plot.

Though the everyday conflicts we experience at work and at home do not usually end up the subject of highly dramatic theatrical productions, when we fail to manage our conflicts well we often start to adopt some melodramatic characteristics in the story we tell ourselves (and others) about our conflict.

The typical structure of a modern melodramatic conflict narrative:

- I am a good person [with context specific examples].
- Life was going well until [villain] came along.
- [Villain] has done x, y, and z to me.
- [Villain] is doing these things deliberately because he is a bad person.
- I am suffering [with sensational language like nightmare, constant battle].
- I want it to stop. I want my old life back. I want what I deserve [as a good person].
- There's nothing I can do or say to make this better.
- One of us [the villain or me] has to go.
- Help me please.

The problem with melodrama narratives:

1. It narrows our thinking about conflict in general (simplifies it)
 - Teaches that conflict is a bad thing
 - Teaches us that conflict is about individualized blame
 - Teaches that conflict is adversarial in nature
2. Restricts our opportunities for managing conflict well (now or in the future)
 - Limits our access to useful information
 - We are encouraged to ignore our own contribution
 - Incentivizes victimhood, passivity, and suffering
3. The failure of dream justice leaves us disillusioned
4. Prevents us from learning and growing

The Tragedy

There is a common misperception of tragedy that it is allied to pessimism. However, tragedy as a genre incorporates much more than a story with an unhappy ending...the generally accepted attributes of the tragic genre include:

- complex characters and plot
- a sense of uncertainty
- imperfect, divided characters
- evocation of the “tragic qualm” when the audience’s idealistic views about fairness and justice are shown to be false
- a main character with a “fatal flaw” whose actions contribute to a reversal in his situation (usually, but not completely, to his detriment)
- a recognition that things are not as they seemed
- some kind of growth or learning through suffering

- the audience’s emotions of pity and fear

The story centers around the actions and dilemmas of one main character, the tragic hero, and his individual struggle to make sense of the world. Tragedy involves some kind of positive re-evaluation of the experience, frequently including learning some important lesson – about oneself, about others, or about what’s really important in life.

What would a tragic conflict story look like (compared to a melodrama)?

- Is more complex (contains more information and more detail; has more nuanced descriptions of characters and events);
- Admits uncertainty (acknowledges that not everything can be known, that there are gaps and inconsistencies that the storyteller may not be able to explain)
- Acknowledges the complexities of what causes conflict (moves away from simplified and individualized attributions of blame, considers all parties’ as well as historical and contextual contributions to the conflict)
- Recognizes that the storyteller has made choices in the past and has choices in the future
- Involves the storyteller taking active steps to try to improve their situation themselves and to embrace change and opportunities for learning and growth.

The Goal of Conflict Coaching: Shift from Melodrama to a Tragedy

Shift	Melodrama	Tragedy with a twist
Simplified – Complex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplified plot • One-dimensional, morally polarized characters • Focus on characters’ actions • Individualized and externalized blame 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex and nuanced version of events • Complex, internally divided characters • Explore characters’ intentions • Acknowledgement of conflicting imperatives, social and contextual factors, mutual contributions
Certainty – Uncertainty	Certain, coherent version of events	Recognize, acknowledge, and accept uncertainty; develop curiosity
Passive – Active	Passive protagonist, submitting to an outcome	Recognize own past actions and choices, prepare for future action and choices, build capacity for self-determination
Dependence– Agency	Reliance on others, helpless and dependent	Take control of own situation, become empowered and independent
Past – Future	Focus on the past and a return to it through dream justice	Plan for a better future, embrace change, paradoxical union of victory and defeat
Suffering – Learning	Suffering, conflict is something that upsets the moral order	Experience as the foundation for learning learning and growth, conflict as an opportunity for improvement

Coaching to facilitate the shift

Virtue's helpers

In melodrama, the heroine has two main helpers: the father figure and the bumbling helper.

The Father Figure

In the melodramatic conflict story, where the protagonist is seeking support from someone identified as a potential “father figure”, the protagonist must first gain sympathy from them to demonstrate their right to that support. Protagonists must convince the father figure of their virtue and their undeserved suffering to gain sympathy and motivate the father figure to act on their behalf. This activity is inherently linked with disempowerment. To gain the perceived power of another, the protagonist must overtly and incontrovertibly present themselves as completely disempowered; otherwise, they leave themselves open to the response “Why don’t you fix it yourself?” The story must make this an impossibility so that the father figure simply must act to maintain his virtue (or risk being recast as one of the villain’s henchmen).

It is important that the conflict support person does not fall into the trap of taking on the role of father figure, because this comes with significant risks. Firstly, it burdens the support person with the responsibility for solving the client’s problem. Secondly, it is highly likely that the client has only presented certain aspects of the conflict situation to the support person, so any advice given or action taken by the support person is likely to be based on incomplete and potentially distorted information. There are risks in intervening (either by providing advice or more active involvement in the conflict) based on a narrow interpretation of events by one of the people involved. The conflict support person will not have access to all of the information that might be available and relevant or may misinterpret what they have been told based on their own biases, knowledge, or experience. The conflict support person inevitably becomes part of the conflict (even if the support person believes they are resolving it) rather than helping the other person manage it themselves. Thirdly, and perhaps most important, by adopting the father figure role, the conflict support person reinforces the client’s helplessness and makes it less likely that the client will become empowered to manage the situation on their own.

Adopting the father figure role can be seductive. It is validating to feel that someone values our advice and it is rewarding to feel that we could help someone. We are also culturally predisposed to value knowledge and to be able to share information. People who are trying to help others solve a conflict may have the best intentions to try to provide support by asking questions rather than telling the other one what to do. However, in many cases, these questions resemble disguised recommendations, rather than curious inquiries (Schein, 2013). For example, when someone asks, “Did you talk to them about it?” this implies that in the questioner’s opinion that was an option. However, telling someone what to do, even if well intentioned and good advice, perpetuates dependency and helplessness. It disempowers the other by implying that they do not know or cannot figure out what they are told.

...we can often do better than simply resolving people’s conflict for them – we can build their capacity to manage their own conflict now and into the future; we can empower them.

When people in conflict feel as though they have no control over the situation, their natural response is to look for someone who they think has this control to help them. They want someone to make the other person change (or go away), or at the very least they want someone to tell them what they should do. Ironically, the more others provide them with the solution, the more disempowered they become.

The Bumbling Helper

Though the bumbling helper may not be able to save the heroine, his presence may create an environment in which the heroine may start to develop some strength to help herself. Imagine that the heroine has been imprisoned alone in a dark dungeon. In an isolated environment, with nobody to sympathize with her fate or to talk to about what is happening, she is likely to succumb to a helpless despair. However, if imprisoned with her helper, she may feel a little bit better than if she were there alone. Though her helper may not be able to find a way to help her escape, he can in a sense share her burden by being with her. In addition, he presents someone for the heroine to talk to. As she talks to her helper about what has happened, she may also start thinking and talking about how she might escape the situation. In doing so, and particularly if the helper is rather clueless, she may need to explain things to him in some detail, so that he understands. As she attempts to explain more clearly what has led to this situation and what possibilities there may be to escape it, she may also start to see more clearly herself and to come up with new, or more nuanced, strategies for managing the situation better in the future. Her helper's presence may also motivate her to take more action than she might have had she been alone. She may be motivated to live up to her helper's image of her by not seeming too pathetic or unworthy.

A bumbling helper approach to working with a client in conflict is much more likely to result in the client opening up and being willing to consider different ways of looking at the situation without feeling judged or defensive. Clients are usually more than happy to help someone who seems motivated to really understand their experience. They willingly provide more information to explain things in such a way that their confused helper can understand and, in doing so, they frequently improve their own understanding.

Simply bumbling around with nothing more than good intentions is likely to cause more harm than good. As the saying goes, there's no point jumping into a river to save someone who is drowning if you can't swim. What I am saying, however, is that adopting some of the attributes of the bumbling helper (for example, appearing confused and asking for clarification of what the protagonist is saying and reinforcing that as a coach there is nothing you can do outside the coaching session that will resolve the client's concerns) will enhance your ability to support the client within a strong framework of conflict coaching skills and process.

Though the coach may begin their role in the client's conflict story as the bumbling helper, the coach effectively works towards removing themselves from the story altogether. As the client begins to make the shift from melodramatic victim to tragic hero, the client develops the awareness and independence to effectively "go it alone". The coach effectively facilitates the client's process of self-reflection. The coach shifts from being a character in the client's story (the bumbling helper) to the audience of the client's tragic soliloquy.

A Good Coach...

- Needs to have a growth mindset when it comes to people in conflict, truly believing that everyone can learn and improve their conflict management skills with the right support.
- Needs to be able to interact with their clients in a nonjudgemental way, showing them unconditional positive regard.
- Needs to understand that the stories clients tell them about their conflicts are never entirely true or complete. They need to be able to support the client to explore the client's story without getting caught up in it themselves.
- Is genuinely curious and interested in understanding clients' experiences. However, they recognize that the purpose of coaching is not for the coach to understand. Rather, the coach is simply there to facilitate the client's better understanding of their own experiences.

- Wants to help others to help themselves.

The primary role of the coach is to provide the opportunity for clients to learn from their own experience.

Coaching Skills

1. The coach needs to be able to create a safe space for the client to engage in self-reflection.
2. The coach needs to have excellent listening skills.
3. The coach needs to be able to ask appropriate questions at the right time.
4. The coach should use the client's language where possible and nondirective language at all times.

Shifts

Shift 1: Simple to Complex

One of the most important shifts required for a client to move away from a melodramatic conflict story towards the tragic genre is the shift from a simplified presentation of the story to a more nuanced and complex version of events. Simple is easy and comforting, but it is not realistic or helpful when it comes to understanding and managing conflicts. As the client unpacks and expands on their original conflict story, the client's clarity and comprehension are likely to improve, and at the same time the story will likely shift away from melodramatic coherence. This can be an unsettling experience for a client, because incorporating this additional information tends to force them to re-examine things they had thought of as right and certain. It is important that the coach provides a safe and supportive environment for this work.

If we do not spend enough time exploring and expanding the client's conflict story, the later shifts...will either not happen or they will happen in a superficial way. I can't emphasize enough the value of simply getting the client to talk in more detail about what has happened.

The coach can achieve this by maintaining a curious stance and presenting as trying to fully understand the situation from the client's perspective. It's important to start only by supporting the client to fill in gaps (rather than try to correct any inconsistencies or incorporate other perspectives) because any suggestion that you might be challenging the client's story at this point is likely to lead them to become defensive and more likely to revert back to the security of their melodramatic story. The coach should take care to ask questions to develop complexity in the story without judging or questioning the client's perspective. If the coach simply asks for more details about what the client has already told them, from a position of curiosity and wanting to understand better the client's experience, the client is likely to be very willing to elaborate.

Clients almost always know much more about the situation than they share in their initial story. They are often not even aware that they have a lot more information available to them that would assist them to better understand the situation and their choices. The metaphor I like to use for this process is based on the melodramatic conflict story plot as a kind of path of stepping stones. The story starts at a location of idealized past and then the client tends to take me to the present by jumping from stepping stone to stepping stone along the way. The stepping stones often each represent an instance in which the villain does something that causes the client to suffer. In between each of those stepping stones, and around each of those stepping stones, is more landscape that is not included in the original story.

I want to take my client right back to the first stepping stone in the story (the first event). At that point, I want to ask my client to look backwards and tell me a bit more detail about what came before that stepping stone. As we then move slowly forward, through the sequence of stepping stones along the path (heading towards dream justice but with a large obstacle in the way at some point, put there by the villain), I walk alongside my client and slow them down. I ask them to describe to me everything we see along the way. I ask what is going on around each stepping stone; I ask what is going on in between each stepping stone. I ask my client, instead of jumping from stone to stone, to walk very slowly along the path in between them and to have a good look around at all points along the way. We also look for different paths that might exist along the way that the client perhaps didn't notice in her original travels or that she chose not to take. We explore where some of those paths might lead. Some of the paths, in hindsight, may be obvious, but some might be quite overgrown and require quite a lot of exploration to identify.

- **Areas to explore to help shift from Simple to Complex**

- Add history and context
- Discuss specific examples in detail
- Fill in the gaps
- Clarify the order of events
- Develop a nuanced understanding of factors contributing to the conflict
- Increase the cast of characters (Focusing the client's attention on people other than the villain can be useful, because considering these characters can often provide different information and perspectives on the conflict.)
- Develop more complex character portrayals

Shift 2: Certain to Uncertain

In conflict situations, feeling certain is almost always going to lead to problems. When we think about our conflict through a melodramatic narrative, we frequently make assumptions and jump to conclusions about things that we do not actually have evidence to support. Shifting from feeling certain about our conflict to recognizing and accepting some uncertainty is important for a few reasons: it helps us identify what it is that we actually know, compared with what we are assuming. We can then consider whether and how we might find information to confirm or disconfirm our assumptions. Recognizing that there are things that we do not know also opens up new possibilities for understanding and managing our conflict and the other people involved.

- **Developing uncertainty about the client's virtue and contributions**

In the melodramatic conflict narrative, one of the easiest ways for the protagonist to maintain their virtuous character is to set the scene by presenting some of their virtuous qualities and then appear to do (and to have done) nothing active in relation to the conflict. One step towards shifting a client's certainty about their own virtue is simply to *ask about the client's actions*.

When coaching a client with a strong sense of righteousness, it can be helpful to support them to consider *alternative possibilities to their past choices*....Even if the client cannot think of anything in particular, they may acknowledge the possibility that there were unintended consequences that they do not know about, again increasing their level of uncertainty and, hopefully, also their curiosity.

The coach can also ask about *what alternative actions the client could have taken* in that moment and what the consequences of those different choices might have been. This line of questioning shifts the client from being certain about their action as the only thing that they could have done at the time to a state of uncertainty (by highlighting unintended consequences and alternatives that the client may not have considered at the time).

- **Support clients to identify assumptions about others' blameworthiness**

When clients are stuck in the melodramatic victim role, they are quick to judge others' behavior and to assume that the reasons behind their actions are deliberate evil intentions based on some kind of character flaw. In psychology, this is known as the "fundamental attribution error", which is the tendency for people to overemphasize personality-based explanations for other people's behaviors and to overemphasize situational factors when it comes to their own actions".

The coach should look out for times that the client is making assumptions about another person's intentions.

- **Develop uncertainty about intent and impact**

As well as typically assuming that the "villain" does everything with an evil intention, clients in conflict frequently present themselves as only having good intentions, and they also assume that the impact of their actions on others is consistent with these good intentions when performing that action.

- **Identify other uncertainties and unknowns**

The coach should be aware of opportunities to highlight uncertainty and unknowns in the client's story. There are certain phrases that clients use that typically signal uncertainty or unknowns, including:

- I think that ...
- I'm not sure ...
- I don't know ...
- I guess maybe ...
- I have no idea ...
- Probably/possibly ...

The coach should look for opportunities to ask questions about what is unknown or uncertain in the client's story. In asking questions about these areas of the client's story, the aim is not to develop knowledge or certainty; rather, it's about supporting the client to acknowledge what they don't know for sure and explore whether it's important for them to find out and, if so, how they might do that.

Some useful questions include:

- What would happen if you are wrong about that (assumption)?
- What makes you think that?
- What information do you have that supports that as the most likely conclusion?
- What could you be missing here?
- What difference would it make if you were 100 percent sure about that?
- How could you find out?
- What are some other possible explanations for [the other's] actions?

- **Developing uncertainty about the right outcome**

When clients come up with an action plan – any action plan – this can often seem like significant progress for them and they can begin to focus on that plan to the exclusion of further exploration of other options. It is important for the coach to slow the client down and encourage them to explore further before committing to the first option they come up with. Reality testing is a useful tool to develop uncertainty about the client's idea of the right outcome. Asking questions about the best- and worst-case scenarios and things that might get in the way of that outcome working as planned can be very helpful.

Shift 3: Passive to Active

- **Identify and evaluate past choices (good and bad)**

Clients generally do not describe past choices as if they have had agency; rather, they describe situations as if someone else (usually the villain) has forced them to do something...Clients who are stuck in a melodramatic conflict story can struggle to recognize that they have made any choices that may have led to the conflict arising, persisting, or escalating.

We could also ask questions such as, “In hindsight, what could you have done to prevent this conflict occurring?” and “What would you do next time...to ensure that this kind of situation did not happen again?”

- **Identify future choices**

Even for people who might be somewhat “stuck” in a conflict situation, there are frequently things that they could do to alleviate their suffering to some extent.

- **Turning uncertainty into action**

When a client recognizes that there is something they do not know, or something that they do not fully understand, they can passively accept this or they can choose to do something about it. They can gather information, ask questions, try to find out whatever it is that is missing from their story that might be helpful to them in deciding how to manage it in the future.

Shift 4: Dependency to Agency

- **Encourage the client to take responsibility right from the start**

When a client uses language like, “I want this to stop” or “I don't want to feel like this”, we should ask them to reframe this into something that they can actively work towards – for example, questions like, “What would you like to be happening instead?” or “How would you like to be feeling instead?” This is another situation when our special listening skills are important. We need to listen to the kind of language that a client uses when they explain what they hope to achieve in coaching.

Questions that can be useful here include “How possible do you think it is for you to change X’s behavior?” or “What kinds of things do you think you could do to motivate X to change their behavior?” If the client is stuck in a melodramatic conflict story, they are likely to respond to those questions in a helpless way, indicating that they don’t feel able to effect those changes. Though this can be a bit of a disheartening start, the coach can then refocus the client on what the client does have agency over. “If X changed in that way, what would be different for you?” and then “Would you like to explore some ways you might be able to work towards those differences yourself?”

- **Encourage the client to make decisions during the coaching session**
- **Invite the client to do things themselves**
- **Don’t give advice or suggestions**

When a client asks you directly what you think about their situation or what you think they should do, redirect the question back to your client. For example, “It’s more important for you to be clear about what you think about your situation and what you think you should do, because you are the one who is going to have to do it, not me! Tell me what you are thinking about your situation right now. What are the areas that seem unclear or most difficult to you right now?”

- **Give the client opportunities to ‘play’ with agency**

SOME USEFUL QUESTIONS FOR HELPING PEOPLE SHIFT FROM DEPENDENCY TO AGENCY

- What do you want?
- How do you feel about that?
- If you didn’t have to worry about what other people thought, what would you say/do?
- What choice do you really want to make here?
- What’s most important to you?
- If your partner/best friend was in your situation, what would you advise them to do and why?

Shift 5: Past to Future

There is...a time in the coaching process when the client needs to be encouraged to let go of the past and look forward towards the future. Though we want our clients to learn from the past, we do not want them to hold on to it, constantly looking backwards. We want them to be future-focused.

- **Encourage a realistic view of the past**
- **Support the client to recognize there is no going back**
- **Support the client to recognize that they can improve**

Another useful big-picture question to ask clients is “What can you take from this experience that you can use to improve your future?”

- **Help the client realize that the future is something they can create**

Shift 6: Suffering to Learning

When people are suffering (either physically or psychologically) it is a natural human reaction to try to put that suffering out of our minds, to ignore it or try to distract ourselves from it. However, if we do this, we will not learn and grow from the experience and we will suffer for nothing. One of the important roles for the coach to play when working with clients in conflict is to support them to focus on their suffering, to observe it and analyze it, so that they can learn from it.

- **We are not as virtuous as we would like to think**
- **Other people are not (usually) inherently evil**
- **Even when life is unfair, we can still choose to learn and grow**
- **Exploring our suffering helps us identify our values and act more intentionally**
- **Take responsibility for our own well-being**

USEFUL QUESTIONS TO FACILITATE THE SHIFT FROM SUFFERING TO LEARNING:

- What if you were actually planted and not buried? What might be starting to grow?
- In what ways might this be an opportunity in disguise?
- How has this struggle built your confidence for the future?
- What is your future self taking from this experience?
- What limiting beliefs can you leave behind after this experience?
- What and who have you found valuable during this challenge? How are you going to cultivate those things and people in your future?
- What can you contribute to others as a result of this experience?
- Looking back at this experience, what are you grateful for?

The REAL Conflict Coaching System

The REAL Conflict Coaching System™ aims to support clients to develop what we call the five Cs: clarity, comprehension, choices, competence, and confidence. Clarity refers to the client gaining a level of mindfulness about what has happened and what the situation is for them right now. It is about recognizing all of the information that is available to them about their situation, some of which they may have been ignoring or discounting. It is about separating fact from assumption and acknowledging uncertainty. Comprehension refers to the client increasing their understanding of the various factors that have influenced the situation and what is most important to them (and others) now and in the future. Choices refers to the client recognizing and reviewing past choices (good and bad) and identifying and evaluating the choices available to them for moving forward. Competence refers to the client increasing their skills in managing the conflict in the future; we also

give the client opportunities to practice, reflect, and develop so that they gain confidence to implement their skills and make their future choices after coaching.

Each stage of the process includes a number of the different shifts, and some shifts will be developed across a number of stages.

REAL Conflict Coaching stages:

- **Goal setting** (past to future and dependence to agency)
- **What happened?** (simple to complex and certain to uncertain)
- **Why does it matter?** (suffering to learning)
- **Other perspectives** (certain to uncertain)
- **Preferred future** (past to future)
- **Action steps** (passive to active and dependence to agency)
- **Reflection** (suffering to learning)

Using REAL Conflict Coaching with the COACH Model

I am most familiar with The COACH Model. Here is how principals & questions from the REAL Conflict Coaching could fit into the COACH Model. The next page includes questions from the book as a guide for conflict coaching conversations.

Connect

Outcome Goal Setting (past to future and dependence to agency)

Awareness What happened? (simple to complex and certain to uncertain)

Why does it matter? (suffering to learning)

Other perspectives (certain to uncertain)

Preferred future (past to future)

Course Action steps (passive to active and dependence to agency)

Highlights Reflection (suffering to learning)

REAL Conflict Coaching with the COACH Model

Connect

Outcome *Goal Setting (past to future and dependence to agency)*

What do you want?

How do you feel about that?

What's most important to you?

Tell me what you are thinking about your situation right now. What are the areas that seem unclear or most difficult to you right now?

How possible do you think it is for you to change X's behavior?

What kinds of things do you think you could do to motivate X to change their behavior?

If X changed in that way, what would be different for you?

Would you like to explore some ways you might be able to work towards those differences yourself?

Awareness *What happened? part 1 (simple to complex)*

(Add history and context, discuss specific examples in detail, clarify the order of events, develop a nuanced understanding of factors contributing to the conflict, increase the cast of characters, develop more complex character portrayals)

What happened? What happened next? (Fill in the gaps before & between the stepping stones)

When was the first time this happened? Another time? The last time? How did you respond?

Tell me about a time when this didn't happen or when interaction was good.

Tell me about your other colleagues? How do you get along with them? How do they seem to get along with _____?

What happened? part 2 (certain to uncertain)

What were some different actions you could have taken?

What makes you think that?

What would happen if you are wrong about that (assumption)?

What information do you have that supports that as the most likely conclusion?

What could you be missing here?

What difference would it make if you were 100 percent sure about that?

How could you find out?

Why does it matter? (suffering to learning)

In what ways might this be an opportunity in disguise?

How has this struggle built your confidence for the future?

Other perspectives (certain to uncertain)

What are some other possible explanations for [the other's] actions?

Preferred future (past to future)

What can you take from this experience that you can use to improve your future?

Course *Action steps (passive to active and dependence to agency)*

In hindsight, what could you have done to prevent this conflict occurring?

What would you do next time to ensure that this kind of situation did not happen again?

If you didn't have to worry about what other people thought, what would you say/do?

What are the potential choices available to you?

What choice do you really want to make here?

If your partner/best friend was in your situation, what would you advise them to do and why?

Highlights *Reflection (Suffering to Learning)*

What is your future self taking from this experience?

What limiting beliefs can you leave behind after this experience?

What and who have you found valuable during this challenge? How are you going to cultivate those things and people in your future?

What can you contribute to others as a result of this experience?

Looking back at this experience, what are you grateful for?