

Whitepaper

CONFLICT STRESS AND RESILIENCE

MEDIATION TRAINING INSTITUTE AT ECKERD COLLEGE

When we talk with people about conflict, we always start by asking them whether they believe that conflict is inevitable in their work. From Shanghai to Berlin to New York, almost everyone says, “Yes, it is inevitable.” We then ask these same people for words they would use to describe conflict. After soliciting a number of words, we ask them to characterize most of the words they have just provided. Their answer is always the same—they say the words are mostly negative.

So people are facing a tough challenge – how to deal with something that they believe is both inevitable and generally negative. This can prove to be very stressful. Research shows that conflict-induced stress can create physical and psychological problems that can lead to burnout. It can also contribute to turnover, lost productivity, and increased health care costs for organizations. (Spector and Bruk-Lee, 2008) As a consequence, it becomes ever more important to help people manage the stress and bounce back from it.

Conflict Resilience

When we talk about resilience, we mean the ability of a person to effectively adapt to or bounce back from the adversity and stress that can arise in conflict settings. A number of elements are involved in improving one’s resilience to conflict. It is helpful to build these skills both to lessen the buildup of stress and to manage rebounding from it. As our colleague Bob Acton, a psychologist and conflict management specialist in Canada, says, “The preparation process is like going to the gym for your mind and heart.”

A helpful first step is to get a better sense of your current level of conflict resilience. We find that Cinnie Noble’s Conflict Resilience Quotient is a helpful tool. (Noble, 2009) It asks a series of questions about how people behave after conflicts. Based on the responses, the Quotient gives a basic sense of an individual’s conflict resilience.

Another element of self-awareness is understanding what triggers unpleasant emotions in conflict. This includes having an honest view of your own emotions under stress and understanding the effect they have on you and others. The Hot Buttons section of the Conflict Dynamics Profile® assessment measures behaviors in others that tend to irritate or upset us. Recognizing and reflecting on these triggers reduces the level of frustration we feel when hot buttons are pushed. (Runde and Flanagan, 2012) It also can prevent our getting “blind-sided” when we encounter someone who behaves in a particular manner. Improved self-awareness can thus serve as a preventative approach to resilience. Recognizing and reflecting on these triggers reduces the level of frustration we feel when hot buttons are pushed. (Runde and Flanagan, 2012) It can also prevent our getting “blind-sided” when we encounter someone who behaves in a particular manner. Improved self-awareness can thus serve as a preventative approach to resilience.

