

Whitepaper

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFLICT COMPETENCE

## MEDIATION TRAINING INSTITUTE AT ECKERD COLLEGE

### Managing Conflict Effectively for Individuals and Organizations

When we ask managers and employees in organizations whether conflict is inevitable, they always agree that it is. Once you acknowledge the inevitability of conflict, the questions about it change. No longer is it a matter of whether you will experience it or not, but, more importantly, what will you get out of it?

Most people we talk with describe conflict as something negative and use words like “stressful” or “frustrating” to describe it. They also describe their principal way of managing conflict as avoidance. Yet, they agree that avoiding it rarely works. Instead, it allows conflict to fester and eventually come back with even more force.

On the organizational level, these types of approaches become expensive. When conflict is not managed effectively, managers are required to spend more of their time addressing it, good employees leave, people are distracted from their work, and, occasionally, complaints, violence, and even lawsuits can ensue.

Poorly managed conflict can also stifle creativity because people tend to pull back when they are in conflict. When people communicate less about issues, innovation and the quality of decision-making can suffer for lack of sufficient input. Implementation is also degraded because people often don’t buy in to decisions if they haven’t contributed much to the discussions that led to them.

If conflict is inevitable and poorly managed conflict is costly, what should individuals and organizations do? We advocate the development of conflict competence—the ability to use awareness and skills to address conflicts in ways that lead to positive outcomes. This is challenging because conflict itself is complex, and our human condition does not naturally prepare us to address it in modern organizational contexts. It is possible, though, to improve both individual and organizational conflict competence as we will see in this white paper.

### DEVELOPING INDIVIDUAL CONFLICT COMPETENCE

From an individual perspective, conflict competence involves developing *cognitive*, *emotional*, and *behavioral* skills that enable you to manage your own emotions, clarify what is happening in the situation, and engage constructively with the other person to find solutions to issues arising from the conflict.

