

Learning on the Run 8: Signals for Readiness to Resolve Conflict

How might we know when conflicting parties are ready to engage with each other productively?

The Request. The Director of a large city Senior Services Department requested that two people in her department receive coaching and facilitation to resolve a deep-seated conflict. The conflict was over control of the budget and was between a Division Director and her direct report, the Family Support Services Program Manager.

Larger Context. Several years ago when the Division Director was hired, the Program Manager applied for that same position. After that, there were numerous clashes particularly over decision making: The Director made many of the decisions, the manager wanted more authority, particularly over his own budget. In the past year, the department was asked to make drastic budget cuts. Priorities were being set by the Division Director in order to conform to the budget cuts. She went to each of her program manager's all hands meeting to explain the situation. During the meeting with the Family Support Services staff, the Program Manager began asking questions during the Division Director's budget explanation to the point that it became obvious to all that the two were not anywhere in agreement. The Division Director lost her composure and began to yell at the Program Manager in front of the entire staff. The Director was given administrative leave and now she was coming back to work and being asked to resolve this issue.

Consulting Intervention. After the Department Director met with the Director and the Manager, both separately and together to explain the process, they were individually coached to prepare for a joint dialogue to vent and then resolve the issues as they saw them¹. Each of the parties participated in several coaching sessions prior to and in preparation for a joint dialogue. Before requesting a joint meeting, coaching was needed to ensure that each party, to the extent possible, was equally ready to engage in a productive discussion. That is, they wanted to resolve the conflict, and were willing to stick it out with the help of a third party. In addition to the facilitator's intuition, the following signals were used to determine readiness:

- Can they state the issue descriptively (and not in judgmental terms)?
- Are they willing to say to the other party all they have to you?
- Are their wants and requirements of the other within reasonable expectations?
- Are they open to the possibility of seeing this issue another way, from the other's perspective and not locked into their view?
- Are they able to keep their emotions from blinding their reason?
- Are they willing to share and offer significant details with you?
- Are they willing to review their assumptions?
- Do they trust you?
- Do they have hope in some resolution?
- Can they articulate or see the benefits of resolution?
- Are they willing to meet of their own free will?
- Can they say how they feel and what they want (their interests)?

Last Line. When coaching people to prepare for a reconciliation dialogue, look for telltale signs that each party is ready to participate and is willing to risk being transparent and vulnerable.

¹ A basic model for this process was put forward by Richard Walton, *Managing Conflict, Interpersonal Dialogue and Third Party Roles*, 1987 and then more recently by Steven Dinkin, et. al.: *The Exchange Strategy for Managing Conflict in Health Care*, 2013.