

Between medieval armour and tangas by Dr. Peter Szabo, MCC

Brief Coaching in a conflict situation

The challenge in working with a single client in conflict situations is often at least twofold:

- In the eyes of the client obviously it is always the other person who should change (first) – yet the other person is not present (and cannot be changed).
- It might seem like it takes a long period of strenuous effort and slow development before the conflict can really get better – of course clients hesitate to invest their energy.

A simple procedure involving scaling questions (A) and an actual case example involving armour and tangas (B) illustrate a solution-focused approach for brief coaching in conflict situations.

A. Proposed procedure: Conflict behaviour scale¹

The following procedure invites clients to increase their choice of action. By reflecting on a set of very specific scaling questions, clients start to detect doable options that allow them to step out of the old (victim) role. They become curious to actively “play” with their part in the relationship and thus introduce change in the interaction pattern. Of course there is no guarantee that the discussed changes resolve the conflict, but usually there is a more than fair chance with relatively low effort involved (see case example B. below).

1. Establish the scale with the client

- What is a fitting title if we were to scale in this conflict between 1 and 10?
- How did you react at 1 on the scale (worst moment of the conflict so far)?
- How would you act differently at 10 (as good as the relationship can get)?
- Where are things right now between the two of you on the scale?
- How high on the scale would you like to get with the relationship?

2. Explore several behavioral positions along the scale

- How would you act differently e.g. at 3, at 8, at 4, at 6 on the scale? (Take the time to explore each position in detail with the following questions)
- Suppose you decide to act according to position x on the scale:
- How is your action/reaction at x on the scale different from other occasions? What else would you do differently?
- What could be some of the positive effects of these differences? How would your conflict partner react differently? How would you react to their reaction?
- How would other people notice differences in your relationship?

3. Decide upon a workable strategy

- Which elements of your choice of actions seem most suitable for specific situations in the near future?
- Which combinations of behavioral options are you most tempted to try?
- What is your strategy for an upcoming situation going to be?

¹ Adapted and extended by Peter Szabó from Sonja Radatz: “Evolutionäres Konflikt-Coaching”

4. Clarify next steps of action

- What are the implications of your strategy for the next hours/days?
- How will the other person notice differences in detail in what you do/not do?
- How will you prepare?

B. Case example: “Between medieval armour and tangas”

George was an actual client who agreed to allow listeners while he worked on his nagging conflict with a team colleague during a workshop on the topic of conflict coaching.

The single coaching session with George occurred in the form of a demonstration for the other participants and lasted roughly 30 minutes. During this session George described the relationship between himself and the colleague as currently at a “2” on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being the worst the relationship had ever been with that particular colleague, and 10 being as good as he thought things could ever get).

In an email 3 weeks after the session George reports: “By the way my relationship with my 'difficult' colleague is at an 8. Following my reassurances to her than an inflammatory email sent by her to me hadn't made me angry my confidence in working with her is at a NINE! I've had quite a shift in confidence in a short period of time.”

So what has happened during the session? How has the client been able to implement such a shift in the weeks following the coaching? How might the coaching have been helpful in achieving such a result?²

a) Solution talk instead of problem talk

Especially when the topic is conflict situations there is a certain danger to spend a good part of the coaching session exploring the conflict. We all have experienced that once clients get started they are sometimes very hard to stop. To our experience it is more helpful to start the session by asking about the desired outcome first.

Coach: “George, I understand you have this conflict with a colleague at your work? So what needs to happen here so this session turns out to be useful to you?”

George: “I guess I need to find a more constructive way to deal with my colleague. Most of the time the way she gets things done, or writes emails or decides to move about things makes me very angry and then I kind of close off and become very defensive and distant. And we should really be collaborating.”

C: “It sounds like it is not easy for you, and I am sure there must be some very good reasons for you to be defensive and distant. Therefore I am curious: how you would like to behave when she does these things instead of being defensive and distant?”

G: “I think I'd like to feel more outgoing and self-assured.” (He nods.) “Yes, and in a way more confident about my standpoint and contribution too.”

C: “I see. Of course I do not know if and how you will get there in this session, but just suppose you did get there. Suppose somehow you would find yourself confident about your standpoint and contribution. How would that make a difference in your next contact with her?”

G: “Hm, (Pause) I do not know. (Pause) Probably if I would just walk right into her office and take the initiative in discussing the decisions we need to take in our joint project...”

² Of course as coaches we might like to believe there is a connection between the coaching and the result. Although a million other factors might have had a much bigger influence on the progress of the client.

Sometimes people are confused about a coaching session started in this manner. How can a coach start working without asking about the issue, the facts and the details of the conflict? Our thinking is, that repeating what is already known about the conflict will usually not generate new insights for the client. We rather invite clients to engage into a new conversation from new perspectives than to repeat an old one.

Most of the time clients have already spent a lot of time thinking about what they do not like about the conflict, but might have only a very vague or even no idea on how they would like things to happen in the future. That's why we invite them to begin the coaching with its ending in mind.

On the coach's side, the more detail known about the problem and its background the more likely the coach might be overwhelmed by the problem, its complexity or start working harder to solve it for the client.

We have found that asking scaling questions helps to further the conversation towards new perspectives. Quite understandably clients are uncomfortable and withdrawn from thinking about the conflict, so the invitation to look at things from a scale of 1 to 10 is meant to help them to gain a more comfortable and distant viewpoint.

C: "George, to give me an idea on where you stand in this conflict on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being the worst it has ever been with her and 10 being as good as you expect it could ever get – knowing her and knowing you and the circumstances... where would you say things are on that scale right now?"

G: "A 2. It is like wearing a set of armour when I am around her to protect me, keeping out of her way most of the time."

C: "You say wearing armour. I am trying to understand how wearing armour being at 2 is already different from the worst it has ever been?"

G: "O, it is very different. It is all about the visor. At two it is open and I have the option to choose between having the visor open or closed."

C: "How is that better for you to have this choice now?"

Scaling answers open up choices for solution talk rather than problem talk. Exploring the progress already made on the scale is a simple step. Even if the progress has "only" been moving from 1 to 2 there are still interesting insights to be gathered from the distance already covered between 1 and 2 (see b). Another helpful option for solution talk is to explore some of the points farther up on the scale (see c).

b) Acknowledgment of difficulty and affirmation of past progress

Let's have a closer look at two details, because they can make a difference between client and coach and are easy to overlook.

- In the first part of the coaching session the coach acknowledges the client: "Yes it must be difficult for you" and "yes there must be very good reasons for you to do what you do." Throughout the session there were other similar statements from the coach. He normalized whenever the client diverted into explaining critical actions by his colleague or details of the extent to which he was disturbed or troubled by all of this. Of course the client is troubled and of course he does the best he can at that moment. Usually by letting clients know that, coach and client are likely to be reminded of something important: the client is ok the way he is and is doing the best he can.

- Another detail well worth paying attention to is any information about things that work well already or any moments of progress in the relationship. This information is often slipped in in half-sentences before diversion into description of difficulties. E.g. George mentions that he has the choice of having the visor open or closed. He even describes it as progress between 1 and 2 on the scale. Finding out more about such details often produces valuable information on possible future actions that have already proven to work. A useful follow-up question can be “how did you manage to do that?” The answer tends to remind clients of how they can maintain improvements. And by asking, the coach makes sure that maintaining progress is valued as a worthwhile and sometimes challenging effort.

c) Finding a new way of looking at things and asking new kinds of questions

Oftentimes, and especially in conflict situations, clients are stuck thinking about how uncomfortable the current situation is. They seem to notice all the things that make it difficult and it is hard for them to move on to thinking about what they would rather have instead.

C: “you say that at 2 you are wearing armour, which makes me wonder: let's say you are standing in front of your closet with all kinds of clothes to wear in conflict situations with her. What would you be wearing at 10?”

G: “Maybe tangas. Yea, feeling good about myself and letting her know I can deal with whatever happens... (laughter from the audience) ... I do not think I'd ever want to wear tangas around her though.”

C: Of course, that sounds reasonable.

So how far would you like to get on the scale if not to 10?”

G: “To a 7, that's more like California casual attire – quite relaxed.”

C: “Suppose, that given the choice of your entire wardrobe, you were to decide that it was time to wear California casual attire, how would that positively effect the interaction between the two of you? What would you be doing or saying differently? How would she be reacting differently...?”

George developed a detailed new interaction pattern that would go on at 7. Of course picking up on the metaphor of the armour and finding different clothes along the scale gave this conversation a special twist. However the main coaching strategy at this point continued to be to find out more about how the client wanted to act differently in future situations with his colleague. Occasionally the coach followed up with questions on the positive effect of future different behaviour, thus hopefully making it even more attractive for the client.

Later on in the conversation George also looked at the 3 and the 5 on the scale, developing even more ideas on new ways to interact.

The coaching strategy was to increase George's choice of action. Eventually something seemed to change the way George observed the conflict. Instead of expecting a slow and strenuous development step-by-step up the scale, he started to see a constant choice of behaviours that were available to him all the time. The selection was similar to a closet full of clothes from which he was free to choose. Some were a bit dustier and some more dear to him. But he owned them all already, and there was no need to buy completely new and unknown clothes.

At the end of the session George determined his “clothing strategy” for the next 5 days. Quite to everyone’s surprise I decided to act as if he was at 7, and see how that made a difference. Asked about what else he wanted out of the session he wanted to spend a few final minutes on mentally rehearsing his meeting with the colleague scheduled for the next morning as preparation for wearing California casual.

One of the most discussed questions from the audience after the demo was this:

“George was an easy client, because he hardly complained about the other person and never said that the other conflict party needed to change first. What do you do as a coach, when the client thinks the other person needs to change first?”

It is our experience that with the described approach, we seem to get more “easy clients” like George.

Yet sometimes clients do talk about causalities like “only if the other does A first then will I be able/willing to do B”.

These clients seem to suffer even more from the conflict since they see themselves as victims totally delivered to someone else’s actions. In such cases we usually go with their perception by asking: “so suppose your colleague does A first, what would you do differently then that you are not yet doing now (and what else)?”

Often times clients have not yet taken the time and effort to think about their action details should the unexpected happen. Usually by drawing a clear picture of what they would do when given their chance, they stumble upon things that they would really like to do even if the conflict partner has not done their bit yet.

Gently, clients can extend their concept of “first A then B” to ideas of “first B and then let’s see where that leads us”.

Among the participants at the end of the workshop we came up with the following list of additional resources for the coach. They might help clients to look differently at the conflict situation and find new questions to ask themselves:

- Suppose A happens, what will you do then?
- How will the other person react to you doing B?
- What might be some of the benefits of you doing B?
- What gives you hope that things could get better between the two of you?
- When did the other person already do smallest bits of A?
- Suppose you had somehow contributed to the other person doing a bit of A – what could your contribution possibly have been?

Much to our pleasure (and surprise)³ George reported back in his email three weeks later that he had somehow managed to move from 2 to 8 on the scale. Should there be a follow-up session with George of course it would be interesting to hear from him how he has managed to do that and what else has become better in the meantime.

³ *Even though I have worked as a brief coach for many years now, seeing most of my clients only one or two times in total, I am still surprised by how clients manage to do their „homework,“ make their lives better and even maintain sustainable change.*

Bibliography

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Biographical note

Doctor of Law by training, Peter Szabó has specialized in brief coaching for corporate and private clients. He teaches coaching at several post-graduate university programmes throughout Europe. With 15 years in corporate HR management experience, he is founder and director of "Weiterbildungsforum Basel", the largest coaching school in Switzerland.

Under the brand name of "SolutionSurfers" the school now offers solutions-focused coach training in English and other languages internationally. Peter is a member of the ICF credential assessment team and a Master Certified Coach. His most recent publication with Insoo Kim Berg is "Brief Coaching for Lasting Solutions" WW. Norton, N.Y., 2005.
