



## Genuine Contact™ Program: Processes for Reducing the Cost of Conflict

The story is familiar. People in a work group complain about backstabbing, brutal conversations, threats and retaliations. They blame each other, personalize conflicts, and won't talk with each other. People are not invited to contribute, if they are, they offer the absolute minimum. Little problems quickly escalate into a major crisis as tempers flare quickly. People don't know what is going on so they fill in the blanks creating an active rumour mill. People report feeling angry, battered, and worn out. They may even say they hate some of the people on the team. Reprimands go on personnel files, grievances against managers are filed, unplanned absences and sick days increase dramatically, and individuals start to leave the team for other jobs. The team is stuck in the cycle of conflict and it can seem like a cancer that keeps on growing.

Miraculously, the group seems to get the job done. People keep trying to do their best because they like the type of work, they like their clients, and they want to do the best they can. This gets harder every day! Internal conflict starts to bleed into client relationships. Service suffers, mistakes get made, and clients may even be brought into the disputes. Opportunities for innovation and better service are only a dream.

The Genuine Contact™ Program offers methods and processes to achieve organizational health and balance and to create conditions in an organization for lowering conflict and the resulting personal and organizational costs. This holistic approach for business success is simple and works with the wisdom and intelligence of the individuals in the organization to create and sustain an effective and successful organization.

What does it take to engage leaders in organizations to do something about conflict before it escalates and hurts both staff and clients? If the personal and emotional costs of conflict are not enough to motivate changes in the system, then can financial costs sound the alarm?

Engaging the attention of leaders to invest in creating a healthy and balanced organization often requires some proof or some way of measuring the return on investment. Recently I discovered a tool that has the potential to draw their attention to the "bottom line" and estimate the financial cost of conflict. That tool is the "Dana Measure of Financial Cost of Organizational Conflict". It is available from the Mediation Training Institute International at <http://www.mediationworks.com/dmi/toolbox.htm>. They provide a PowerPoint presentation and an on-line calculator that can help you quantify the cost of conflict in your organization. The calculator includes the following cost factors:

1. wasted time/opportunity cost of wasted time
2. reduced decision quality
3. lost employees
4. restructuring
5. sabotage/theft/damage
6. lowered job motivation
7. lost work time
8. health costs



Be prepared to be surprised at the results! I recently worked with a client to estimate the costs for a year of conflict in this organization. Depending upon the factors that we included, the annual cost for the conflict in this small team (fewer than 10 people) was estimated to be from \$250,000 to \$500,000! And this conflict had been raging for 3 or 4 years!! Would these numbers motivate earlier resolution of workplace conflicts in your organization? While there are both humane and morale reasons for our work to create healthy organizational systems or Conscious Open Space Organizations, these sorts of numbers provide eye-opening financial reasons for doing so.

There are many wonderful programs and resources such as those from the Mediation Training Institute International available to support you in working more effectively with conflict in your organization and hopefully reducing or preventing these costs. As a facilitator of mediation programs at Dalhousie University College of Continuing Education and Registered Practitioner in Dispute Resolution, I am constantly learning and developing my skills and personal ability to journey with individuals and organizations to bring new and healthier futures into reality.

The Genuine Contact™ Program processes (especially Whole Person Process Facilitation and Working With Open Space Technology) have enhanced my competency in working to resolve conflicts, particularly group conflicts. These collective processes invite people to open to and develop their natural human capacity to create new futures. I am particularly excited by the potential of this program to support the emergence of capacity in organizations to sustain health and balance both for individuals and their teams – lowering the cost of conflict and increasing the success of the organization on an ongoing basis. Birgitt and Ward Williams, creators of the Genuine Contact™ Program, call these high performing organizations Conscious Open Space Organizations. These simple meeting processes (OST and WPPF) can be learned and used frequently within any organization. Why not have a successful organization and provide a nourishing environment in which the human spirit can flourish creatively and fulfill its potential? I'd like to work in such an organization. Would you?

Workplaces and communities need new collective practices like these to work more effectively. Researchers Duxbury and Higgins reported that between 1991 and 2001 conditions have “seriously deteriorated” for many Canadian workers.<sup>1</sup> A 2004 report from Warren Shepell suggested that changes in Canadian public sector workplaces have resulted in 900% increases in anger rates over the past three years and a doubling of depression rates.<sup>2</sup> Another report from Health Canada showed that work-life conflict is adding at least an extra \$6 billion a year to Canada's annual healthcare costs<sup>3</sup>. I want to see things change! It doesn't have to be like this!

So with this passion I seek out leaders who will want to see things change. There are many leaders who see the pain of the people who work in their organizations and want to see changes too. But they don't know what to do about it! They may be personally suffering from the conflicts and stresses to the point that they have little energy left themselves. What are the

---

<sup>1</sup> Work-Life Balance in the new millennium: Where are we? Where do we need to go? By Linda Duxbury and Chris Higgins, CPRN Discussion Paper No. W/12 October 2001 at [http://www.cprn.com/documents/7314\\_en.PDF](http://www.cprn.com/documents/7314_en.PDF)

<sup>2</sup> News Release Public Sector Workers' Rates of Anger and Depression Reaching Critical Levels at <http://www.warrenshepell.com/newsroom/pr-20040712.asp>

<sup>3</sup> Workplace Stress Cost Billions in Industry news December 2004 at <http://www.benefitscanada.com/content/legacy/Content/2004/12-04/industry.pdf>



costs to a manager of making the choice to do something about the conflicts in the team and take action to change things? Where do they get the personal energy and resources needed to take this bold step?

I have been learning to know and trust the amazing capacity of human beings to make the choices that will work for them, trusting their wisdom to do what they are able to do to sustain life in themselves and their organizations. In conversations with leaders of today's high pressure workplaces, I hear their struggles with these difficult choices. First, if they agree to move forward with a new approach, they are admitting that they couldn't solve these problems themselves. They may also already see that they have contributed to this situation. These are both hard pills to swallow! They will undoubtedly have to let go of some well entrenched beliefs about people needing to be managed and controlled – beliefs that have been reinforced throughout much of their career and training – despite libraries of research and documentation that question the utility of authoritarian control practices and question the ability of old ways of thinking to create new results.

I remember reading a Harvard Business Review article on a plane one day about 13-14 years ago while I was working as a regional manager in a federal government department. As I read this article about new approaches to leadership and participative management I was thinking yes, yes, yes! Then I checked the references and was horrified to see that I had been reading a reprint of a Harvard classic published some 20 years before. What???? How could this be that I was still feeling like I was pushing water up hill to get ideas about participative processes accepted when this was old news?? How indeed! Sadly the integration of new ideas into our workplace systems seems to take a long time. This is not because leaders are ill intentioned.

How many leaders have the time to read what leading edge researchers are saying? And if they do, the step from reading to applying new ways of working in the midst of intense and high pressure work demands is daunting. I have much empathy for today's leaders who want to see different results but just don't know "how" to get there. And the "how" that we are offering invites them to be vulnerable, to let go of the old practices and somehow touch and work from their authentic humanness. This is an inner place we all have the capacity to work from and the source from which authentic and courageous leaders work, however leaders may not have a lot of practice in accessing and working from this level.

I love the work of MIT's Otto Scharmer who calls this inner source the "blind spot of leadership". Scharmer talks about noticing in his work with leadership teams "that leaders could not meet their existing challenges by operating only on the basis of past experiences." He talks about a "deeper learning cycle based on one's sensing of an emerging future, rather than one's past experiences". He calls learning or acting from this source as "presencing". "It means to sense and bring into the present one's highest future potential – the future that depends on us to bring it into being"<sup>4</sup>. I immediately recognize what he is talking about from my own journey and remember how lonely and scary it sometimes feels to be part of birthing of something new. And I also know with certainty that it must be done.

---

<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from: Theory U: Leading From The Emerging Future, Presencing Profound Innovation and Change in Business, Society and the Self (forthcoming) by C. Otto Scharmer, MIT, November 2005, Third Draft, pg 5 at <http://www.ottoscharmer.com/index.htm>



As I sit with a leader, courageous enough to consider doing something about the conflicts that are erupting within their work units, courageous enough to want to create a healthy and balanced organization, I am learning to have more and more compassion for them and for the steps ahead. This is not easy work. This is a cross roads and choosing the road less traveled is the beginning of quite a journey. I sit and listen, create space for them to begin to look more deeply and begin to see more clearly the situation in which they are struggling, and consider the choices they can make. I share stories of what is possible and my belief in the human capacity to work through these situations and make choices for life.

Some leaders are ready. Some are not. Those who step in often do so because they see few other choices – nothing else has worked. They wonder if they can trust me or this program or processes I offer. I believe that in the space of these honest and powerful conversations they somehow touch the core of their own knowing that there is a better way. They move through their fear knowing there is only one choice they can make and start down that road less traveled. They are glad to have someone accompany them on the journey.

Scharmer describes this process I experience both with leaders and with groups in wonderful language. He talks about accessing different sources of intelligence as we move from downloading the story, to opening the mind, opening the heart and finally opening the will. “When operating on this level our work focuses on getting the self out of the way in order to open a space, a clearing....grace is the word that comes closest to the texture of this experience that refuses to be dragged onto the surface of words”<sup>5</sup>.

Using the Medicine Wheel Tool from the Genuine Contact™ Program as a framework for assessing and regenerating organizational health and balance and Whole Person Process Facilitation, I step into the chaos with a group in conflict. As my work with the group unfolds, I sit in the circle and hear the stories of pain and heartbreak expressed, see the anger move through people in waves and make way for the expressions of desires to be respected, heard, appreciated and cared for by their colleagues. Gradually ever so gradually, like the sky clearing after a storm, I watch as glimmers of sunshine, warmth and hope begin to shine through and the meaningful conversations about what they could do and how they could work and be together in new and more life nurturing relationships emerge. I sit in awe of the human capacity for healing and wholeness. In the words of a client “There were no more games, just simple truth, caring, the beginning of understanding and an acknowledgment that everybody wanted something better and, they were willing to work for it. That was almost two months ago and the changes started from the first day we returned to the office..... What I can’t begin to describe is the light that has come back into people’s eyes, the energy that has returned and the willingness to share and help that has developed....and the “real work” seems to be taking care of itself.”

What a privilege is mine to work with real human beings and watch the birthing of new futures right before my eyes. No the work is not done. There is more to do to sustain the unfolding of vibrant life in these teams and organizations, but it is a beginning and opening to give energy for the next steps to institutionalize new ways of working together. They have moved through the dark night of the organizational soul and have a vision for something better. Now they have

---

<sup>5</sup> Scharmer, 2005 pg 8



**EMERGENT FUTURES**  
consulting inc.  
*Innovative processes for individual  
and collective performance*

some energy and a space to begin to develop their own capacity and practices to sustain life in their team.

We talked about the cost of conflict, but what is the return on investment if we decide to spend dollars on making changes to achieve organizational health? Returning to the small team example I used earlier, if the conservative estimate of \$250,000 annual cost of this conflict for this small team was reduced even by 25% for one year, they would have received a return on investment for my services of about 700%. The experience to date of this team would suggest a far higher increase in productivity and returns. Imagine the return on investment of preventing conflicts in whole companies or departments? My business partner and I have always said that “it is not about” the money. There is a lot of money being wasted, and as Dr Dana’s work points out, these costs are often hidden.

We can use these sorts of calculations to support the investment in conflict resolution and organizational healing processes and even better yet in early conflict prevention and organizational health. Our first investment however must be in creating space for these leaders to open not only their minds to this work, but to journey with them as they open their hearts and wills to a new future. In the words of my client “I saw another way and took it....all I did was point the way and invite some people along. It happened because there was a facilitator who understood, gave space, cared and took care. The group made it happen because they were finally honest, were truthful and they cared.” I say it happened because this leader dared to act from his deeper source – and it opened the possibilities for his team to do access their potential and a new future is emerging.

Our willingness to be authentic and genuine practitioners ourselves, willing to work from that inner place from which genuine and compassionate action originates is essential. Genuine contact begets genuine contact and opens the pathways for the will to change and a new reality to be created.

*I want to thank my clients for their courage, inspiration and willingness to share a small piece of their journey with me. A special thanks goes to those whose quotes are used in this article to help inspire others.*

Donna Clark is certified as a trainer in the Genuine Contact™ Program and a partner in **Courage** Group International Inc. She provides services in leadership development, coaching, conflict transformation, and collaborative processes for organizational health to clients in Eastern Canada. She can be contacted at

Emergent Futures Consulting, Inc.  
94 Bedros Lane Suite 403  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Canada B3M 4X3  
[donna@emergentfutures.ca](mailto:donna@emergentfutures.ca)  
[www.emergentfutures.ca](http://www.emergentfutures.ca)