



Sparring and Role-Playing are Effective Exercises

By Katherine Coffman, Former President, Executive Women in Government (EWG)

One morning while walking in the local park, I noticed two men sparring. I was intrigued so I spent a few minutes watching them. They seemed to be enjoying the experience of moving back-and-forth, around in circles, taking quick jabs and making light contact with each other's gloves, and repeating the drill.

As I watched them, the thought of resolving conflict in the workplace came to mind. I wonder what we can learn from the exercise of sparring and how to apply those lessons to develop leadership skills.

Sparring is an important part of training and its purpose is to be a learning experience. The point of sparring is to make you and your partner better; it isn't to hurt anyone. As a boxer, you use sparring to familiarize yourself and be prepared for the high-intensity environment of a fight.

It occurred to me that we often find ourselves in high-intensity work environments. I wonder, how can we use sparring as a metaphor in dealing with workplace conflict. Conflict in the workplace is common. People have disagreements about ideas, decisions, actions, values, interests, and a wide variety of other causes. Workplace conflict also occurs in relationships when two or more people just don't get along.

Conflict in the workplace causes performance to suffer, employees to feel uncomfortable, or hard to get things done. All this leads to lower-than-desired productivity.

By dealing with the conflict, you gain improved productivity, better teamwork, increased morale, a more positive environment, better relationships, and less stress.



There are two key concepts to ending conflict: be willing to end it and taking responsibility. And as a leader, we owe it to the organization and our customers to look at how we are tolerating or contributing to a culture of conflict in the workplace. There are many effective strategies to resolving conflict.



One effective way to resolve conflict is to role-play before having a crucial conversation. The purpose of the role-play is for you to pre-plan and prepare to have an effective interchange with the person in order to come to resolution. Role-playing is useful because it helps you to enact a stressful conversation, build your capacity to understand the other person's position and resistance, and identify areas for potential agreement.

Using sparring as a model for role-playing, you engage with a trusted advisor as your sparring partner to first discover how willing you are to resolve the conflict, how flexible you are willing to be, what you are willing to do differently or give up, and how responsible you are willing to be for the impact you might be having on the other person. You explore what it would look like if the conflict were resolved. Identify where you are not willing to compromise, and not willing to be flexible.

Then you and your partner can explore and assess what the other person's position is, what objections you anticipate, and how the other person will respond. You brainstorm ideas on what to say to acknowledge the other person's issues and prepare questions to ask so you more fully understand the other person's position and interest. By planning on your potential responses, you can gain clarity on your position.

Now that you have clarity of your position and potential objections of the other person, you are ready to practice your opening remarks until it is concise and effective. Then move to role-playing what would likely flow in the conversation, including questions and objections the other person might raise. Through role-playing, you will experience what is working, what you can say or not say to improve the clarity of your position, and gain an understanding of how you will respond if the other person is resistant.

Role-playing provides a "thinking, saying, and doing" exercise which helps you develop your plan of action if the other person gets angry or says something that is inflammatory. Having a respectful exit strategy of excusing yourself from the conversation before things spiral downhill is beneficial so you can maintain your professionalism. By taking a break, you can reconsider your approach and reconvene after everyone has cooled down.

Role-playing is like sparring - both are important as learning experiences. The point of role-playing is to make you a better leader; it isn't to hurt anyone. By role-playing, you experience



the joy of mental exercises by moving back-and-forth in flow of an important conversation and thought process, the experience of making quick and effective points, and staying connected with the other person without contact or injury. As a leader, you can use role-playing to prepare for an important conversation in the workplace so that no one gets hurt and you gain resolution to conflict.



About the Author:

Katherine “KC” Coffman is an experience executive coach certified through the International Coach Federation, and Principal of Coffman Coaching, LLC. As a retired federal C-Suite executive, she is passionate about working with new federal executives and leaders to boost their knowledge, self-confidence, leadership, decision-making, communication, conflict management, and employee engagement skills.

As a military spouse, Katherine launched her 33-year federal career in 1981 as an entry level clerk-typist. In 2009, with more than 10 years of international experience, multiple assignments of increasing complexity and leadership responsibilities, she joined the federal Senior Executive Service. Katherine served for nine years as a senior executive expanding her impact by providing successful, meaningful, performance shifting leadership and strategic direction for large, complex human resource and leadership development organizations.