Conflict coaching: Conflict management strategies and skills for the individual
Jones, Tricia S. and Brinkert, Ross
Sage Publications, 2008, Thousand Oaks, CA
344 pages.

Reviewed by: Juliann C. Scholl – Texas Tech University - www.depts.ttu.edu/communicationstudies.

        Jones and Brinkert write a text that advocates an increasingly popular approach to
conflict that focuses on the individual. The authors propose the Comprehensive Conflict
Coaching (CCC) model, which helps clients understand their own conflicts and enact the
appropriate strategies and skills for effective conflict management. The CCC model draws on
Fisher's Narrative Paradigm (Fisher, 1985, 1987) and takes the client through four stages. In
Stage One, the client pieces together an initial story describing the conflict from multiple
individuals' perspectives.   In Stage Two, the client further processes the story through the
dimensions of identity, emotion, and power. Stage Three draws on Appreciative Inquiry (AI;
Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) to prompt the client to craft a future story that links back to the
initial account. Stage Four helps the client construct an action plan that focuses on three
communication functions: confrontation, confirmation, and comprehension. This four-stage
process is paralleled by a learning assessment method that enables the coach to identify what
works well and to diagnose areas for improvement in coaching. Jones and Brinkert conclude
their book with two chapters that address the benefit of needs assessment and looking ahead to
how one-on-one conflict coaching can be further researched and incorporated into one's
consultancy.

        Jones and Brinkert demonstrate a thorough understanding of Fisher's Narrative Paradigm
as well as its applicability to various contexts. Their rationale is well-founded by the research
and application of this theory that has already been conducted in a wide variety of situations (see
Cragan & Shields, 1995). Moreover, Jones and Brinkert's use of narrative to appreciate and
manage conflict are in keeping with Fisher's (1985a, 1985b, 1987a) core narrative assumptions.
By taking advantage of clients' natural tendencies to tell stories, clients can be coached to
interpret events through their narration, use their narratives to construct appropriate ways of
responding to their situations, and formulate effective plans of action to manage their conflicts.

The Jones and Brinkert's narrative approach seems to imply that you cannot change what you do not acknowledge. Crafting a story that can be told from multiple perspectives enables a client to acknowledge significant sources of conflict. As the sample story on pages 141-143 illustrates, portraying the conflict from all vantage points may shed light on the conflict drivers of which the client had not yet been aware. In turn, those drivers (i.e., circumstances, client's mistakes) can be acknowledged as areas for change. However, this seems to be as far as the authors take this idea of acknowledgement. When introducing the AI approach, they argue that by dwelling "only on the mistakes and problems, you may decide on a course of action that destroys the good as well as the bad" (p. 145). They go on to claim that concentrating mainly on the client's strengths "will usually also address weaknesses or make them much less relevant" (p. 145). While this reviewer agrees that a client's assets and strong points merit emphasis, paying scarce attention to a client's weaknesses may do little to acknowledge the changes needed to manage a conflict successfully. The authors could have bolstered their argument for the AI approach by elaborating on how sole emphasis on strengths naturally makes weaknesses less relevant.

With regard to narrative, Jones and Brinkert could have presented the narrative paradigm in contrast to more traditional, rational approaches that are based on objective evidence and empirical reasoning. When used appropriately and effectively, narrative can be even more compelling and efficacious than an approach that draws on empirical evidence. An argument or rationale that draws a comparison between the approaches can perhaps do more to convince the reader of the merit of delving into the client's story as opposed to analyzing objective measures of a conflict situation. Such a narrative approach may also shed light on the kinds of details that some objective measures may not reveal.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned concerns, *Conflict Coaching* would be a valuable addition to any consultant's library. This well-researched book provides practical, feasible steps to guide virtually any client through the complicated maze of conflict management. *Conflict Coaching* serves as an important tool for practitioners, and it sets an agenda for future research in individualized conflict management.

References

Cooperrider, D., & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry into organizational life. In R. Woodman & W. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development* (Vol. 1, pp. 129-169). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Cragan, J. R., & Shields, D. C. (1995). *Symbolic theories in applied communication research*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc.

Fisher, W. R. (1985). *Human communication as narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Fisher, W. R. (1987). Clarifying the narrative paradigm. *Communication Monographs, 56*, 55-58.