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Alternative dispute resolution in a high-context culture and collectivist society: possibilities to apply conflict coaching approach in Indonesia

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Abstract: Conflict Coaching is an approach of Alternative Dispute Resolution worthy of discussion. As a new approach that assists conflicting parties to cope with their dispute without the attendance of the opposing party, Conflict Coaching offers broad potentials in a unique way, especially in empowering personal conflict handling strategies. Yet, there appear to be some challenges in applying this approach, particularly for those who come from high-context culture in a collectivist society such as Indonesia. This article presents an analysis of the possibility to implement conflict coaching in Indonesia by looking closely at the characteristics and values of Indonesians from a cultural, religious, and gendered perspective.

Keywords: Conflict Coaching. High-context culture. Collectivist society.

Summary: Introduction – High *vs* low-context culture and collectivist *vs* individualist – The emergence of conflict coaching – The conflict coaching approach: opportunities or challenges? – Cultural context in Indonesia – Communication style – Decision making – Conclusions – References

Introduction

Conflict coaching is a unique and distinct approach in the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) field that combines coaching and conflict management (Nobel, 2008). This approach has become more popular these days in developed countries such as Australia, especially in the workplace context (Spencer and Hardy, 2014). Furthermore, various communities in this field have been growing (Brinkert, 2016) along with the development of a variety of conflict coaching models such as Problem Solving for One "PS1" (Tidwell, 1997), Conflict Education Resource

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Team "CERT" (Brinkert, 2002), CINERGY (Nobel, 2012), Comprehensive Conflict Coaching "CCC" (Jones & Brinkert, 2008) and REAL Conflict Coaching (Alexander & Hardy, 2014).

The conflict coaching approach has also been recognized as an alternative that can be applied when other conflict resolution processes are not suitable in any particular conflict situation, such as when one party refuses to mediation (Nobel, 2008). Another reason is that some people might feel that it is much safer for them to discuss their conflict situation with someone who devotes their time to actively listen to them (Spencer and Hardy, 2014). Given that this approach has become an alluring approach as another conflict resolution process, its suitability could be associated with a number of factors such as culture, religion, gender and communication style. This paper aims to examine whether a conflict coaching approach is suitable for people in a high-context culture and collectivist society, like Indonesia.

High *vs* low-context culture and collectivist *vs* individualist

Many researchers have unveiled how the variables of culture, such as communication style and individualist or collectivist attitudes and values, can affect the way people deal with conflict (Croucher, at. al, 2012). This is because culture influences people's way of thinking through custom and customary laws, habits, attitudes and values, as well as other cultural principles and standards that have been developed in particular places.

The concept of the communication styles was initially introduced by Edward T. Hall in 1976. He divided the ways people communicate with others into two styles that include high and low-context communication (Hurn and Tomalin, 2013). The characteristics of both styles are very different. In a high-context society, "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the massage" (Hall, 1976, p. 79). Therefore, it is required for listeners to devote more time to interpret the meaning of the words of the speakers (Korac-Kakabadse, et al., 2001).

However, if the listeners use the same communication style, high-context, they do not need to be provided with further background information about the conversation, because they already can read and understand the context (Hall and Hall, 1990; Korac-Kakabadse, et al., 2001). On the other hand, in a low-context culture "the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, p.79). A listener from a low-context culture has to be told in very specific words to really understand what the speaker means (Korac-Kakabadse, et al., 2001) since they are accustomed to messages via direct words and are less inclined to read or understand the context.

Triandis (2001) described people who come from collectivist society as being more reliant on their group and put the goals of their groups as their priority. Whereas, in individualist cultures people are encouraged to be independent from others and their own personal goals are their priority (Triandis, 2001). Gudykunst et al. (1988) believe that the dimensions of high-context and low-context culture are related to the concepts of collectivism and individualism, respectively. Based on many studies, it is argued that Indonesia could be recognized as a high-context and collectivist society.

The emergence of conflict coaching

Conflict coaching is included as one of several dispute resolution processes. As Herrmann (2012) points out, conflict coaching is a dispute support service that helps people to deal with their conflict situation. Jones and Brinket (2008) also describes conflict coaching as one-on-one communication between coach and client to develop the client's understandings, interaction strategies, and interaction skills related to their conflicts. Conflict coaching has emerged as a relatively new and distinctive approach, compared to other conflict resolution processes. Jones and Brinket argue that the main foundation contributing to the development of this approach comes from executive coaching and the conflict resolution field (2008). Nobel (2008) also believes that conflict coaching was inspired by the emergence of a number of conflicts in workplace.

Jones and Brinket point out that the basic notions of 'conflict' and 'coaching' have been addressed by various scholars and practitioners in the two fields, executive coaching and conflict resolution. Conflict coaching has grown and now gets attention from practitioners, especially in the conflict resolution field. Many of them have developed a variety of models. In addition, a number of practitioners have combined this approach with others, such as mediation, in which mediators coach their clients, particularly in the pre-mediation stage (Nobel, 2008).

The conflict coaching approach: opportunities or challenges?

The conflict coaching approach is popular in many communities with an individualist and low-context culture such as in Australia and many other Western countries. The next session examines whether this approach is also applicable to communities with high-context and communal cultures such as in Indonesia. Many ethnic groups in Indonesia have "consensually-based deliberative procedures" to resolve conflicts that emerge in the community (Moore and Santosa, 1995).

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Cultural context in Indonesia

Culture plays an important role in many areas of life, including business, politics and social life, including the approach taken to conflict resolution. Cultural studies have become the concern of social science which offers a variety of definitions, although none of them are cross-disciplinary (Gudykunst et. al., 1988). In the Indonesian context, it is difficult to describe Indonesian values in one definition (Irawanto et. al. 2011), since Indonesia consists of hundreds of ethnic groups, each with different values.

However, based on earlier observations and studies (Chua & Gudykunst, 1987 & Korac-Kakabadse et. al, 2001), most of Indonesia's ethnic groups could be described as being collectivist and have high-context communication style, like many other Asian societies. At the same time, it is also understood that Western culture has been quite influential in Indonesia which has led to some changes in people's characteristics and behaviours, including their communication style. Having said that, Hall (1976) still believes that even though people in a society use both styles of communication, one of them is normally dominant.

Communication style

Due to its fundamental contribution to both escalating and de-escalating tension, the style of communication used should be taken into account in any conflict situation (Croucher, 2012). It is usually understood that the way disputing parties communicate tend to be affected by their conflict situation, since a lot of emotional issues are often involved, such as anger and sadness. Gudykunst, et al. (1988) affirm that culture affects how people communicate, including how people express their feelings when they face a conflict.

In relation to people in a high-context society, Croucher, at al. (2012) state that people from a high-context culture tend to avoid direct conflict or confrontational approaches. Similarly, Obuchi, et al. (1994) point out that respondents from collectivist countries are observed to be more avoidance prone compared to their individualist counterparts. In the Indonesian context, some ethnic groups, like in Sundanese and Javanese societies, often avoid engaging in direct debate with someone who has opposite views (Moore and Santosa, 1995). Therefore, conflict coaching could be a better alternative for people in a high-context culture, especially in Indonesia, since the absence of another party could enable them to be more open with their feelings and thoughts. However, it is important to comprehensively examine whether this opportunity would be suitable for Indonesians from different cultural backgrounds.

In the Indonesian context, there are some communication characteristics that are more likely to be practiced generally by Indonesian people. First, it is commonly known that the style of communication for most Indonesians is not to go straight to the point, rather they tend to talk about the chronologies and other areas under discussion before the main points are raised (Moore and Santosa, 1995).

According to Hall (1973), people from a high-context culture expect their listeners to understand what is on their minds without expressing directly their feelings in words. This might make the conflict coaching process ineffective, in terms of the duration of meetings and the effectiveness of conversations, since people using high-context communication style may need to take some time to get to their main points when they communicate (Korac-Kakabadse, et al., 2001). However, this can provide an opportunity to elicit parties' perspectives if the process is facilitated by professionals who can detect and address the hidden messages of their clients, and who are able to manage the communication.

In addition, the concept of *"sopan-santun"* (politeness) is an essential principle of communication in Indonesia. The way people communicate with people from the same status level as themselves (e.g. age, position in the government, social status, gender) will be different to communication with people who have higher or lower status (Moore and Santosa, 1995). One example is that women from Java, the biggest ethnic group in Indonesia, are required to speak politely to men (Smith-Hefner, 1988).

In conflict coaching, coaches may be dealing with a "coachee" who might come from a different structural position or social status than themselves. As a result, it could be challenging for coaches to engage in effective conversation with their clients if there is this cultural communication gap. The process, in some points, could also be affected by this communication style. It might be difficult to engage in an honest discussion, since in order to be polite, often Indonesians need to hide their real feelings in order to avoid being rude.

Politeness not only can affect honesty, but also might affect the clarity of conversation. As Sukarno (2014) points out, it is required of the listeners to interpret the hidden messages behind the polite words of the speakers. For example, in order to be polite, Javanese people often say words that literally have different meaning in the messages that they convey (Sukarno, 2014).

The style and the principles influencing communication might hinder the process of conflict coaching. In conflict coaching, coachees, with the assistance of the coaches, are required to share their stories in the coaching session. In some models, clients are required to be honest. For example, a sample agreement of "Real Conflict Coaching International" mentions that one of the roles of the clients

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is "to be open and honest" (Conflict Coaching International, 2013). In addition, clarity in relation to what is happening in the clients' conflicts is very important.

In the "Real Conflict Coaching" model, story exploration has become an important part of the process, and time for this allocated in a stage called "what happened". In Comprehensive Conflict Coaching (CCC) Model, Jones and Brinket describe the "discovering story" as an important stage in the process in order for the coach to have a comprehensive understanding of the conflict. At the end of the process, the story is expected to be formulated in such a way as to encourage them to gain the best solution for their own conflicts. Thus, honesty and clarity are an essential part of conflict coaching.

Since open communication is an essential part of the conflict coaching approach, clients are required to be engaged effectively and to communicate with their coaches. Therefore, even though there are obstacles to achieving an appropriate result when this approach is applied in Indonesian cultures, it is crucial that coaches have an understanding of high-context communication style and effective listening skills so they can spot their coachees' unspoken messages and provide the best outcomes.

Decision making

Cultural background also influences the way people make a decision, although sometimes it is possible to change the nature of decision and the process involved (Li et. al., 2015). Li et. al argue that culture has a significant impact on our 'psychological processes' in decision making. In fact, sociocultural, norms and systems of values have been recognized as having a determining effect on how individuals respond their conflicts or views (Haar, 1999). People from collectivist societies are more likely to consider collective needs or interests before making any decisions for themselves. They are more likely to be more concerned about maintaining relationship rather than achieving a personal goal (Triandis, 2001).

In terms of the existing values in a collectivist society such as Indonesia, the consideration of others, such as family, group and/or tribal members, is an important consideration when making any decision. As in many other collectivist countries, Indonesian people tend to rely more on others rather than be independent. Those tendencies often occur when people are dealing with conflicts.

In Indonesia, the concepts of 'musyawarah - mufakat' (deliberation and consensus) are basic principles influencing decision making. These principles provide an important foundation to create 'democratic-stability' in Indonesia and have been used at both grass roots and national levels (Kawamura, 2011). The concepts of deliberation and consensus have a close relationship to the creation of harmony in society. The willingness to maintain harmony in Indonesia societies is

the result of high-context communication style (Kim, et al., 2005). The concept of '*rukun*' (harmony) is one of the core principles in most of Indonesian communities (Haar et. al., 1999; Mulder, 1996). It would be very difficult for Indonesian people to independently create their own decisions without considering others around them.

Conflict resolution is often associated with decision making. There are many decisions that might be made by someone facing a conflict, including the choice of the approach to be used, and decisions about future options and the possible outcomes or solutions. In the conflict coaching process, clients are expected to independently develop their own understandings and options in relation to their conflict, without the help of coaches. For example, Jones and Brinket (2008) suggest that one of the goals of conflict coaching is to empower clients. One of the roles of clients is "to be responsible for making his/her own decisions" (International Conflict Coaching, 2013, pp.50). Because of the dependency of people in a collectivist society, such as Indonesia, especially in decision-making, this could pose another challenge to the application of a Western style of conflict coaching in Indonesia.

Another consideration to be analysed is the the potential areas where conflict coaching could be applied into decision making; these could include religion, leadership, law, and gender. Many Eastern countries around the world, including Indonesia, are now in transforming into a more democratic nations, but the dominant cultural values of obedience and loyalty to others could pose challenges to the implementation of conflict coaching.

First of all, at the grass root level, the values of customary law and religion are the basis of personal and communal decision making as well as the national law. In terms of interpersonal conflict, customary law and religion determine the way people deal with conflicts. Some conflict cases have been resolved by 'non-judicial procedures' such as *'adat'* (customary law) where the authorities facilitate people in conflict to negotiate their conflicts (Moore and Santosa, 1995). Some Indonesian communities have their own model of conflict resolution through customary law. The Indonesian legal system provides opportunities for people who have interpersonal conflicts to solve their cases by themselves outside of the tribunal system through mediation, such as for family and commercial disputes.

Religious leaders also play an important role in assisting people to resolve conflicts in Indonesia (Suprapto, 2015). In several communities, the loyalty to religious leaders and other respected people is important, since they guide people on a daily basis. As a result, when many Indonesians face conflict, they will obey the decision of their leaders. Even though most people in many regions have become aware of the ideas of modern Western approaches to leadership that

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encourage all members to be part of decision making activities, it might be difficult or at least challenging to implement these ideas in Indonesia, as traditionally the leaders have been the decision makers (Suryani et al., 2012).

Suryani et al. (2012) note that Indonesia is a hierarchical society, and assertiveness and individuality are not valued. For example, employees might be capable of making their own decisions, but they still rely on and respect their leader's decisions. Indonesians when dealing with conflict tend to submit to others who have higher socio-religious status or are more respected than them. Haar et. al. (1999) also found that Indonesians are more likely to choose a submissive response when in conflict. This is one of the basic characteristics of people living in a collectivist society.

Gender is also important consideration. In some traditional writings, women are viewed as a complement to or accessory for men (Pryatna, 2013). In most local traditions in Indonesia, men play a major role in conflict resolutions, although this issue has been debated. When women have moved into traditional male roles such as in education and the workplace, frequently they have been challenged by religious and cultural issues. For example, one of the cultural and religious assumptions about women is that women should not drag men (husbands) into their projects (Pryatna, 2013), such as their education or employment activities.

Conclusions

In Indonesia, cultural and religious values are important and have challenged the suitability of many modern Western approaches to conflict resolution. Most of the current models of conflict coaching have been developed in Western countries which have an emphasis on democracy, individualism and self-determination. These values are different to the hierarchical and collectivist values of people in Eastern countries, such as in Indonesia.

The suitability of Western styles of conflict coaching in Indonesia could be challenged by factors such as communication styles, the traditional processes of decision making and other variables such as law, customs, religion, leadership styles and gender. However, to some extent, culture and lifestyles in Indonesia in some points have been changed through modernisation, information technology and global interaction. Thus, there is potential for developing and applying a modified conflict coaching approach which takes into account the local cultural values and blends the best of the West with the best of the East. In addition, the significant role that local leaders play in Indonesia should be taken into account. They should be consulted and involved in the construction of culturally relevant approaches to resolving conflicts.

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