

CONFLICT COACHING, MEDIATION AND GOVERNANCE IN THE WORKPLACE

Tiny incisions can bring about expansive healing.
Selana Kong shares her insights into conflict coaching.

Mediation is a dispute-resolution process that is efficient, cost-effective and confidential. Parties have more control over the outcome compared to a court order. It safeguards reputations and relationships. Since the Singapore Convention on Mediation came into force in 2018, the enforcement of mediated settlement agreements across borders has been easier. The UK became one of the 56 signatories of the Singapore Convention in 2023. Mediation requires both disputing parties to be involved, while conflict coaching can be used with one disputing coachee.

Before qualifying as a coach, I had a full-time music career as a singer, teacher and conductor. I experienced coaching for the first time during the Clore Leadership Programme (CLP), where middle-senior arts and culture leaders in the UK are empowered to create change in the culture of leadership. Since then, I added coaching to my own portfolio career and coached many education, arts and cultural professionals in Hong Kong and the UK. In 2018, in a leadership position, I used my coaching skills to support my CEO through managing a crisis. This powerful experience inspired me to become a professional mediator, and I received my training and accreditation in professional international mediation in 2021.

I launched my coaching business in the UK in 2021 and integrated my specialisms in music, leadership, coaching and mediation to develop my niche as a conflict coach for arts and cultural executives in the UK. In a discussion with a fellow coach mediator, I reckoned that, in order to solve the problem from the source, we needed to address governance issues so that conflicts can be prevented. I completed a corporate governance diploma in 2022 and started coaching at CEO and COO levels in 2023.

ARE YOU A PIN OR A KNIFE?

What the Chinese call *mianzi*, the concept of 'face' exists at varied levels in different cultures.

In China, prescribed social status is very important. Being challenged publicly is considered shameful. Harmony is created by avoiding confrontation. So, when Chinese people disagree, they tend to behave like a pin or a needle, as Professor Erin Meyer described in her book *The Culture Map*.¹ The conflict appears to be orderly and calm as people refrain from challenging someone's idea in front of a group. Instead, they use subtle hints to imply the slightest deviating perspectives from the other side.

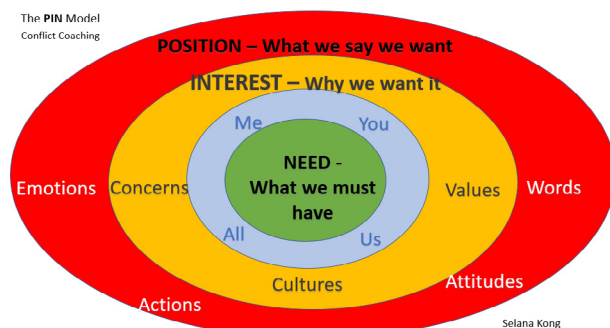
In Western countries, different ideas are encouraged. People are taught to disagree openly to refresh their thinking. A good debate is considered an intellectual exercise. This approach is like a knife, in that it looks and sounds like a bold battle that eliminates risks, yet potentially injures relationships.

THE PIN MODEL

I developed my own conflict coaching model, called **PIN: position, interest and need**.

The PIN model is a complex model that helps coachees get a holistic view of a situation² and come up with a new narrative by exercising curiosity and compassion.³ In a nutshell, this model helps coachees to reframe their narratives and let go of **POSITIONS** so they can understand **INTERESTS** and meet **NEEDS**.

The PIN Model
Conflict Coaching



POSITIONS are the first level of consciousness about what we want. These are words (what we say), attitudes (what we think), actions (what we do) and emotions (what we feel). The problem with positions is that when people are in distress they say things they don't mean; they can't see biases and blind spots, they do things that are not rational or logical, and they fight, flee or freeze. People tend to focus on who's right and who's wrong, and get into deadlocks. This is why positions are usually not helpful: we need to help coachees to move to their interests.

INTERESTS are the second level of consciousness; I ask coachees why they want what they want. Interests include values (personal belief systems), cultures (evaluating performance, persuasion, leadership, decision-making, trust, disagreeing productively and scheduling) and concerns (core shared needs, such as appreciation, affiliation, autonomy and status). The problem with interests is that there are a million reasons why people want what they want. What helps coachees accept differences and find common ground is considering all the needs that stakeholders must meet.

NEEDS are the deepest and most important level of consciousness; it is what we must have. They include me (the self), you (the other party), us (a community or society) and all (the whole of life).

By the end of the coaching process, I will have helped the coachee to come up with a new narrative to reflect a holistic view of reality. They would have improved their ability to consider wider and more detailed perspectives, generate multiple win-win solutions, and meet their own needs while letting others meet their own needs.

CASE STUDY

UK arts and cultural organisations are restructuring and downsizing in the hope that they will remain financially viable during the unprecedented economic crisis following the Covid-19 pandemic. Increased workloads and reduced budgets intensify conflict in the workplace. I recently had a conflict coaching arrangement with a registered charity (the sponsor) in England. It is an intercultural team that has recently gone through the upheaval of restructuring and downsizing. Pressure on two senior executives came from having limited time and a budget cut – with blurred boundaries arising from sharing tasks and responsibilities between team members.

The PIN model can be used with either a single coachee or multiple coachees. I adopted the structure of mediation using separate meetings (known as a 'caucus' in mediation) as well as joint meetings at various stages of the negotiation. Before coaching began, I had a one-to-one situational assessment with the sponsor

to set coaching goals. Next, I set up a coaching contract for the sponsor with agreed ethics, covering coaching model, timeframe, process, reporting and pricing. Then, I sent an 'agreement to coach', including information about their autonomy, agreed level of confidentiality, reporting, timeframe, coaching model and coaching process. Both coachees booked their first one-to-one online coaching session with me and completed the coaching agreement.

The PIN coaching process is flexible because the nature of conflict is complex and sometimes involves multiple individuals. I began with one-to-one situational assessments with each coachee. I listened to their perspectives, checked perceptions, and asked questions about personal background, team dynamics, organisational culture and context. When appropriate, I invited both coachees to joint coaching sessions to share perspectives, set priorities, generate options and settle agreements. Typically, there would be another separate one-to-one session to discuss sensitive issues. One-to-one conversations are confidential, and the level of reporting is agreed in advance. In the final joint session, I helped the coachees to improve offers and check realities before making a final settlement agreement. An interim progress report and a final report were submitted to the sponsor. Typically, the process takes three-to-six months.

CONFLICT COACHING USING A PIN

In my experience, conflict coaching is like a pin and not a knife. Carefully crafted dialogues – in the same way as Chinese acupuncture – can heal inflammation, recirculate communication and create new energies for moving a conflict situation forward. It leads to new opportunities to improve governance, and future conflicts can be proactively avoided. I strongly advocate a holistic approach to integrating coaching, mediation and governance for sustainable business development.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Selana is a British Chinese who lives in Llangollen, North Wales. She is a trustee of the International Eisteddfod and a Clore fellow who is accredited in corporate governance, professional international mediation and relational dynamics coaching. She is currently the AC regional coordinator for Canada and Greater China, and the managing director of the International Dispute Resolution and Risk Management UK Centre. Selana sings with the North Wales Opera Studio.

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