Resolving Issues with Your Boss (Part 12B):
Controlled Communications Scenarios

By

Mark Lefcowitz
Senior Process Engineer

Summary of Part 12A

Part 12A was the first part in the examination of the conflict resolution strategy of Controlled Communications. The strategy is an exceedingly structured approach for resolving conflicts through clear, collaborative, and neutral messaging. It outlines essential phases, such as preparation, dialogue, and problem-solving, and highlights its successful application in both domestic and international conflicts, including historical peace agreements and business disputes.

A variety of international , domestic and business dispute examples were briefly cited and discussed.

The impertinent Question

The idea that using Controlled Communications might be unrealistic as a conflict resolution strategy in the workplace—especially without the presence of a third-party facilitator—is premature.

In response, I ask, "Why not?" Nothing in dispute resolution theory or practice establishes that a single strategy cannot support others. Nor does it stipulate anywhere that a strategy must be pursued to its absolute successful conclusion to be considered useful in supporting conflict resolution and tension reduction.

Controlled Communications is just one of eleven conflict resolution strategies we will discuss, excluding outright force. We have already briefly covered Litigation, Arbitration, Negotiation, Mediation, and, in greater detail, Phased Intercession. My focus is on strategies that can be implemented without an attorney until (1) the parties have thoroughly discussed the causal factors of the conflict and (2) areas of agreement -- not disagreement -- have been fully explored.

With this in mind, we can discuss Controlled Communications in a less restrictive context.

Pros and Cons

The positive and negative aspects of initiating a Controlled Communications effort were reviewed in the previous article. Here, I will revisit these, specifically within the context of workplace disputes.

On the positive side, by maintaining professional standards of courtesy, discussions remain formal and respectful. The presence of a third-party facilitator can help balance power dynamics, ensuring all parties have an equal opportunity to be heard. Managing an incremental communication process enables progress toward a resolution, rather than forcing an immediate compromise.

However, Controlled Communications has some weaknesses. Most notably, it requires the employer to voluntarily agree to meet with their employee(s) on a point of dispute, rather than opting for summary action. The structured process can also be slow, especially when multiple rounds of communication are needed. It is not suitable for urgent action or when quick resolution is needed.

A poorly managed process, whether or not using a third-party facilitator, may fail to control tensions or allow one side to dominate. Using the traditional involvement of Human Resources may not result in a truly disinterested facilitator. In instances of severe mistrust or entrenched hostility, Controlled Communications alone may not resolve the dispute.

Applying a Round-Robin Approach

Provided that both parties demonstrate a commitment to fairness and civility and understand the benefits and ground rules of Controlled Communications, proceeding without a third-party facilitator may be feasible.

One way of implementing this strategy is through a round-robin approach using the affinization problem-solving technique.

Affinization organizes and categorizes ideas, issues, or factors into meaningful groups based on their natural relationships. It helps workgroups analyze large amounts of information by identifying patterns and common themes.

The affinity process typically involves data collection, idea generation, silent grouping, labeling groups, and final review. While affinization does not determine root causes, it supports deeper causal analysis by structuring information for further investigation. Once root causes are identified through additional analysis, workgroups can develop an action plan prioritizing corrective actions to prevent or mitigate the problem's recurrence.

Throughout the process the parties refine the wording of their issue statement to ensure neutrality and mutual understanding before prioritizing the issues.

Both parties agree to reconvene at a set time, allowing them to prepare data to support their positions. Three one-hour sessions are scheduled for each issue, with 20 minutes of facilitation by each party, followed by a 20-minute summary. The facilitator ensures civility and adherence to the agenda.

Each issue is discussed in order, and action items are assigned to each party with deadlines.

Workplace Example Scenarios

Scenario 1: A large technology company is experiencing a prolonged labor dispute with its employees. The primary issues are (1) a push by management to reduce remote work opportunities, citing productivity concerns, and (2) pay differentials between employees who work onsite and those working remotely.

Phase 1: Identifying and Grouping Issues: Both management and employee representatives present their concerns. Through an affinity diagram, issues are categorized into key areas: productivity measurement, remote work policies, pay equity, and employee engagement. Each party refines issue wording to ensure neutrality and mutual understanding before prioritizing the discussion order.

Phase 2: Structured Discussion Sessions: For each identified issue, three one-hour sessions are scheduled, with alternating facilitation. In the session on productivity concerns, management presents data suggesting decreased collaboration in remote work settings, while employees counter with studies showing maintained or improved efficiency. Sub-issues—such as inconsistent remote work policies across departments—are identified for deeper discussion.

In addressing pay differentials, management argues that onsite employees bear additional costs, such as commuting, while employees assert that pay should be based on role, not location. Each side presents supporting data before discussing potential compensation adjustments.

Phase 3: Summarizing Agreements and Assigning Action Items: After each session, agreements and unresolved points are documented. Action items—such as conducting an independent productivity study or revisiting pay structures—are assigned with clear deadlines. The facilitator ensures clarity in assigned responsibilities.

Phase 4: Final Agreement and Path Forward: A concluding session consolidates agreed-upon actions, such as refining remote work guidelines and establishing a transparent pay evaluation system. The round-robin approach ensures both management and employees contribute equally to resolutions, fostering a cooperative and sustainable work environment.

Scenario 2: A supervisor is having an issue with an employee's quality of work, and the employee cites fast-paced demands as a barrier to meeting quality standards.

Phase 1: Identifying Core Issues: Both the supervisor and employee list their concerns. Through an affinity diagram, issues are categorized into key areas: workload expectations, available resources, training gaps, and performance evaluation criteria. They refine the wording of concerns to ensure mutual understanding before prioritizing discussion topics.

Phase 2: Structured Discussion Format: Each issue is discussed over three one-hour sessions, with alternating facilitation. In the discussion on workload expectations, the supervisor explains the need for timely output, while the employee describes challenges in balancing speed and accuracy. Sub-issues—such as unclear task prioritization—are identified for further discussion.

For training gaps, the employee requests additional guidance on complex tasks, while the supervisor presents available resources. The conversation shifts to the effectiveness of current training methods and potential improvements.

Phase 3: Summarizing Agreements and Assigning Action Items: At the end of each session, key discussion points are summarized. Action items—such as implementing clearer task prioritization, refining quality benchmarks, and providing targeted training—are assigned with deadlines.

Phase 4: Establishing a Cooperative Plan: A final working session consolidates agreements and formalizes a plan for ongoing communication and support. The round-robin approach ensures

both parties contribute equally to resolving concerns, improving work quality while addressing workload challenges.

Conclusion

By implementing the round-robin strategy, both scenarios benefit from a fair and collaborative dialogue, where each side has equal time to express their perspectives, follow structured discussions, and work toward common ground. This approach ensures that each party is involved in the decision-making process, allowing for a more effective, equitable resolution of the dispute. The round-robin method provides a balance between structured communication and the flexibility needed to address the core issues in each case.

The aim of Controlled Communications is to clarify and help each party understand the other's issues and identify possible areas of agreement. Through the Controlled Communications process, a dialogue has begun. If that, alone, is accomplished, the result seems well worth the effort.

* Note: A pdf copy of this article can be found at:
https://www.mcl-associates.com/downloads/resolving_issues_with_your_boss_part12B.pdf

References

BetterEvaluation. (n.d.). *Round robin*. *BetterEvaluation*. Retrieved from
https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/methods/round-robin

Fry, D., Nhenga, T. C., Izumi, N., & Bernheim, B. (2022). *Round Robin: A new qualitative methodology for identifying drivers of violence against children*. *The Qualitative Report, 27*(9), 1975–1997.

Goel, N., & Garg, R. B. (2013). *Simulation of an optimum multilevel dynamic round robin scheduling algorithm*. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Computer Science and Software Engineering, 3*(9), 404–410.

Kieckhaefer, J. M., Vallano, J. P., & Schreiber Compo, N. (2019). *It takes two: The round-robin methodology for investigative interviewing research*. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law, 26*(5), 780–792.

Noldus Information Technology. (2021). *Round robin design in dyadic interactions*. *Noldus Information Technology*. Retrieved from https://www.noldus.com/blog/round-robin-dyadic-interactions

Powell, B. J., Fernandez, M. E., Williams, N. J., Aarons, G. A., Beidas, R. S., Lewis, C. C., ... & Weiner, B. J. (2021). *Enhancing the impact of implementation strategies in healthcare: A research agenda*. *Frontiers in Public Health, 9*, 692224.

Sari, D. F. (2020). *The implementation of the round robin technique with peer feedback to improve grade 11 science-track students' speaking skills*. *Journal of English Education and Teaching, 4*(2), 170–182.

Shukla, D., Jain, S., Singhai, R., & Agarwal, R. K. (2010). *A Markov chain model for the analysis of round-robin scheduling scheme*. *International Journal of Computer Applications, 1*(15), 1–5.

Sibanda, J. (2019). *An investigation of the round robin brainstorming in improving English speaking ability among Nakhonphanom University's second-year students in Thailand*. *English Language Teaching, 12*(8), 181–189.

Voltage Control. (2024). *The impact of effective facilitation on team performance, innovation, and organizational success*. *Voltage Control*. Retrieved from https://voltagecontrol.com/articles/the-impact-of-effective-facilitation-on-team-performance-innovation-and-organizational-success/