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# Virginia Quality Institute's Conflict Management Training

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**Virginia Quality Institute's  
Conflict Management Training**

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**A Research Project Presented to  
The Graduate Faculty of the  
Department of Occupational and Technical Studies  
Old Dominion University**

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**In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements of the Degree  
Master of Science in Education**

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**By  
Marguerite Inscoe**

**August 2005**

## **Approval Page**

This research paper was prepared under the direction of Dr. John M. Ritz in OTED 636, Problems in Occupational and Technical Studies. It was submitted to the Graduate Program Director in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science.

Approved, August 2005

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE.....	i
LIST OF TABLES.....	iv
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of Problem.....	2
Research Goals.....	2
Background and Significance.....	2
Limitations.....	4
Assumptions.....	5
Procedures.....	6
Definition of Terms.....	7
Overview of Chapters.....	8
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	9
Workplace Conflict.....	9
Conflict Management.....	11
Educational Approaches.....	12
Conflict Management Strategies.....	13
Verbal Mitigation Techniques.....	15
Training Evaluation.....	17
Summary.....	20

III.	METHODS AND PROCEDURES.....	21
	Population.....	21
	Instrument Design.....	22
	Method of Data Collection.....	25
	Statistical Analysis.....	26
	Summary.....	27
IV.	FINDINGS.....	28
	Overview of Responses.....	29
	Explanation of Survey Results.....	29
	Summary.....	38
V.	SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	40
	Summary.....	40
	Conclusions.....	42
	Recommendations.....	47
	REFERENCES.....	50
	APPENDIX A.....	56
	Email Introductory Letter.....	56
	Email Survey.....	57

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Feeling Equipped and Corresponding Amount of Effort Used .....	30
2. Use and Perceived Success of Recommended Verbal Mitigation Techniques.....	32
3. Chi-Square Values for Difference Between Mitigation Technique Use and Success.....	34
4. Use and Perceived Success of Recommended Conflict Strategies.....	36
5. Chi-Square Values for Difference Between Correct and Incorrect Conflict Strategy Options.....	38

# CHAPTER I

## Introduction

Interpersonal conflict exists within any type of organization. How it is managed will be reflected in work efficiency and employee morale. Conflict is a positive attribute when it is properly focused and handled. It can be a source of energy, new ideas, and better decision-making. It is the opposite of groupthink.

Socially many people feel it is not acceptable to disagree, argue, or confront others with their opinion so they keep quiet and let frustration from the silent tension build up inside (Anderson, Foster-Kuehn, & McKinney, 1996). The results are lost creative energy and morale begins to decrease among workers. In other work environments, almost the opposite happens. The employees and supervisors are very direct and to-the-point about uncomfortable issues, but they lack any tack in communicating their perspectives. This approach can increase interpersonal tensions. It can build barriers through encouraging stereotypes (Burgess, 2003) and create an unwillingness to take personal responsibility for mistakes (Williams, n.d.).

Training is commonly used to address these workplace issues. Many of the problems can be solved through educating employees on how to react differently in a conflict situation. One such training provider, Virginia Quality Institute, has questioned the effectiveness of their four-hour conflict management-training program. They chose to look beyond the positive training room comments received. When a trainee was confronted by a conflict situation, did they feel adequately equipped to handle it? This paper describes how Virginia Quality Institute found a way to learn more about the efficacy of their program.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study was to determine if Virginia Quality Institute's conflict management training attendees were successful in using the recommended conflict strategies and verbal techniques to mitigate difficult conversations and conflict situations at their job.

## **Research Goals**

To guide the solutions of this problem, the following goals were established:

1. Did the trainees feel adequately equipped in the training session to use the recommended verbal techniques and conflict strategies?
2. How much effort did the trainees put into using what they were taught?
3. Were the trainees successful in using any of the seven recommended verbal techniques to mitigate difficult conversations?
4. Were the trainees successful in appropriately using one or more of the five recommended conflict strategies for larger or multi-dimensional conflict issues?

## **Background and Significance**

Virginia Quality Institute has provided a conflict management training course to a wide variety of clients in many industries for over the past four years. The content did not change significantly during that time. This was largely due to the fact that the immediate classroom feedback was positive and did not lend expressing a need for modification. While all indications from the outside (trainee and client feedback) pointed toward a successful course, Virginia Quality Institute knew that true on-the-job application was not substantiated.



Virginia Quality Institute is a small non-profit organization that provides customized training services to Hampton Roads, Virginia, businesses. Their quest this past year was to become more professional and legitimate in the eyes of the consumer. This would increase sales and assist in the improvement of the workforce community as a whole. The institute focused heavily on curriculum development and exceptional platform skills, but an important element of their training services was missing. It was a more thorough and tangible evaluation process of every training session conducted. This meant determining not just the trainee's enjoyment of the session and knowledge of the material, but their application of it in the workplace. This is commonly known as a level three evaluation, called "behavior" within the Kirkpatrick Model (Phillips, 2002). Not many contract training companies provide that depth of service and for a common reason, the additional commitment of finances and time. There is also an inherent risk of exposing the true value the training has produced. Virginia Quality Institute knew if they could find a way to assess applied behavior, they would have the edge on many competitors with their training services.

An effective solution for the described problem was determined through the fortunate attendance of the organization's director at a local business trainer's meeting. The speaker was a Coast Guard officer and trainer who had an evaluation issue similar to Virginia Quality Institute's. Their centralized training program could not determine its effectiveness with the graduated trainees sent to their assigned posts. They had solved the problem using an online/email based survey program. After further research, Virginia Quality Institute decided to purchase the program themselves and implement a system

similar to the Coast Guard's program. They hoped to demonstrate a return on investment for the training programs.

The significance of this research impacts both Virginia Quality Institute and each client for whom the conflict management training is performed. For Virginia Quality Institute, they can better determine any curriculum needs or show there is opportunity for increasing the transfer of training to the workplace. This improves the quality of the service in a tangible fashion instead of a superficial sense. The data and individual comments collected can be a great asset to the promotion of more conflict management training with other clients. The automatic survey follow-ups, 60 to 90 days after each program, could keep the communication link open with clients and improve the chance for a repeat business request. The significance for each client is a clearer picture of the value of their investment. This is very important to training managers who need to justify their expenditures and return on investment (Thompson & Wellins, 2003).

### **Limitations**

There are many kinds of conflict management such as international disputes, physical altercations, and marital difficulties. This research did not cover any of the afore-mentioned types. In the business world there are conflicts between organizations, with state and federal law, and between employees. This research was strictly based on workplace communication issues that did not become physically violent. Though some of the concepts taught in the training program are used in conflict resolution processes, VQI's training focused on how to better communicate during difficult conversations, not the mediation of irreconcilable employee relationships.

Conceptually, the term training in this research means classroom instruction (one instructor) with activities and discussion to guide change in individual behaviors. The conflict management training program was 90% off-the-shelf and 10% modified for client needs. It was strictly a maximum of four hours in length. It serviced 25 or fewer participants, and in most cases there was little follow-up or reinforcement from attendee's superiors. There was some general needs assessment done preliminarily, but most of the adjustments were made during the flow of the discussion in the classroom. The participants were either front-line employees or supervisors and there was a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, ages, and work experiences among them. Only the client could choose which of their employees would attend the training session. The client also chose when and where it was to be conducted. This means the course was not taught on a regular basis to consistent types of participants and industries; however, the same instructor was used.

### **Assumptions**

This research was based upon the following assumptions:

1. The same instructor taught all of the training sessions. It was assumed that the core objectives were consistently covered each time.
2. Each trainee should have had equal chance for participation and practice. Due to limited training time, a less formal approach for checking knowledge was used. It was assumed that they grasped the concepts communicated and their questions were sufficiently answered.

3. It was assumed that all participants did and will continue to encounter conflict within the workplace, so they will have a chance to apply what they were taught.
4. The response-rate percentage for each session's follow-up survey varied greatly. The researcher felt that all classes were conducted with enough similarity thus the combined surveys were enough to gather a sufficient picture of the conflict management training course's success.

### **Procedures**

Performing a deeper evaluation of training by looking at an employee's on-the-job behavior can be done in several different ways. These would include direct observation, supervisor comments, productivity reports, customer reviews, and performance reviews (Netherton, 2004). Commonly, more than one data collection method is used. Since Virginia Quality Institute was limited in funds and time, and, because it wanted to avoid obtrusiveness with the client, they determined surveying the participants and their supervisors directly through email would provide the credible data they would need. Obtaining permission and cooperation from the client was necessary. It was left to each participant's own discretion to respond. In order to encourage involvement, the participants were told that the system was entirely anonymous and that their responses could not be traced. Also promotions such as gift certificates were offered for those who participated (still anonymous format). If the response level was still too low, then a simple email reminder from the client (usually the manager who scheduled the training) was sent encouraging the trainees to take a few moments to complete it.

The questioning format of the survey was modified slightly at times for client reasons and for general improvement. The research goals (ends) did not change. The evaluation program is continual and does not currently have an end date. For the purposes of generating this report, the data collection period ended before the July 4<sup>th</sup> 2005. All data collected will be retained by Virginia Quality Institute for proprietary reasons. It will only be shared outside of the organization upon the client's permission.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms used in this research paper were defined for the reader:

Action-ability - A type of questioning in the research survey. It means that the questions require the surveyed to give a certain answer, from which can be deduced specific needs for improvement in instruction or curriculum.

CM - Conflict management. How one can properly handle their personal opposition or incompatibility with others so that results are favorable for each party involved.

Conflict - A disagreement or a clash between ideas, principles, or people. It is the existence of incompatibility or opposition to another's thoughts or opinions (Encarta Dictionary, 2004).

HR - Human Resources.

HRD - Human Resources Development.

Management - The act of handing or controlling something in a successful manner.

VQI - Virginia Quality Institute Inc.

## **Overview of the Chapters**

This chapter established the importance of effective CM within the workplace environment. The research problem was to determine the efficacy of VQI's CM training course. This included:

1. How much effort trainees put into what they had learned.
2. Were the verbal techniques and conflict strategies successful in helping them mitigate their conflict situations.

As described in the limitations section, this study of CM is focused on workplace arguments and disagreements. The researcher was not able to control who participated in the training but was ensured that the same learning points were consistently covered. There was a large range of business industries and trainee demographics.

Chapter II continues to build a background describing CM and its training approaches, through a review of literature. Specifically, what are the types of conflicts workers experience frequently on the job and how does it affect their performance? Also, were the verbal techniques and conflict strategies recommended found to be beneficial within the workplace setting?

Chapter III describes the procedures applied for surveying the training participants. The selected method of questioning will be defined, pointing towards action-ability on the type of response it receives. Chapter IV presents the data and findings of the research survey process. Finally the last chapter summarizes the findings and outlines the analytical approach taken for the investigator's conclusions. Recommendations for further research in this field are made.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Review of Literature**

Managing workplace conflict is not a new concept. This chapter will describe the kinds of workplace conflict that exist and what it has meant for these to be managed. Organizations have seen the financial benefits of addressing these issues, so many have formalized systems to train and/or channel these problems in a more productive manner (Noble, n.d.; “Organizational and workplace...”, n.d.). The purpose of this review is to show how conflict has been managed, how the various strategies work, and how do these compare to what VQI has to offer. In conclusion, a review of training evaluation methods is provided to support the data collection method used in this research.

#### **Workplace Conflict**

Warner performed one of the first studies of social dynamics in the workplace in the 1930’s. It was during an era of American industrialization when social diversity and unified labor representation was at its highest level. Most of the conflict was viewed as a lack of cooperation between workers and management. What spurred the need for research was the sluggish productivity that was impeding economic recovery in the Great Depression. Lloyd’s study, what was called industrial anthropology, has since been criticized for being too management-centric. The theoretical framework never addressed the uneven balance of power between the working class and management, thus a solution to create social harmony was not determined. However, the study of anthropology laid the foundation for what is known today as labor relations (Baba, 1997).

The study of workplace conflict has continued to evolve. Its beginnings with labor relations and management is now only a small part of what is being examined.

With increased competition in business markets, a need for maximum output of products and efficiency of service is required to stay profitable. In turn, management's sensitivity towards worker's personal needs and their everyday social interactions has come under further scrutiny (Blum & Wall, 1997). Outside of labor relations, conflict between parties can occur for any number of underlying reasons. These can include differing perceptions; communication problems; differing views over content of the issue; differing moral, social or religious values; differing goals; pressure of responsibilities; status differences or power play; emotional issues; personality clashes; competition for limited resources; systems and environmental problems; and organization and leadership problems ("Workplace conflict...", n.d., p. 1).

While workplace conflict does not usually lead to physical assault, today's society has shown some erratic behavior. A 1997 study reported that 110,000 acts of violence occurred each year in American workplaces (Ford, 1997). Businesses have taken aggressive steps to stem the tide of workplace violence; however, more socially acceptable reactions to conflict such as verbal confrontations and/or lack of cooperation among workers still exist and are more difficult to manage. These social behaviors can be detrimental to businesses that do not establish a working intervention process (Watson, 2003).

Besides procedural policies or guidelines, training or education of management can effectively negate much of the negative conflict that results in everyday workplace interactions (Davies, 2004).



## **Conflict Management**

In organizations, the department of human resources is usually held responsible for maintaining interpersonal employee order within the workplace. They instigate needed training programs and are often the “listening ear” of employee complaints (Shea, 2000; “MB468...”, 2004). In research, performed by Blum & Wall, on various sized mid-western firms, they determined what were HR’s three most common approaches to managing conflict. They are as follows.

The most frequent method utilized with employee complaints, stemming from conflict, encompasses an investigation in all parties involved, and then a proposal of concessions or specific agreements. Another more moderately used approach would include an attempt to advise the disgruntled employees on how to act, by pointing to company policies. The mediator would use calming statements and share objective data in an effort to resolve the dispute. The least commonly used approach included a third party for the dispute assistance and an attempt to connect more to the emotions of the employees. This would involve calling for apologies, asking for understanding of the other side, and even commending employee’s for having addressed the conflict (Blum & Wall, 1997).

Conflict disputes handled by HR are usually escalated in nature. Underlying currents of conflict and tension among co-workers can exist for a long time, but are only brought to attention of management when it obviously affects job performance or creates a hostile work environment. HR assumes a reactive approach when treating this kind of situation, possibly missing the opportunity to resolve the root cause of the issue because they are encumbered by the details (Brown, 2004). In turn, a repeat of the problem can

occur. Seeing this, HR is now taking a more proactive approach, by providing training for supervisors and employees on how to better handle their interpersonal conflicts (Noble, 2005). Training that addresses common reasons for conflict, the psychology of common reactions, outcomes, and best practices to handle each situation, can help negate workplace conflict at its inception (Loescher, 1993).

### **Educational Approaches**

Training is an increasingly popular approach to handling performance based issues. Since CM training is not usually an established curriculum in any traditional education setting, organizations have taken it upon themselves to teach what it takes to get their employees to work better with each other. How the training is incorporated varies greatly. Some can include a maintenance or follow-up system to reinforce the training, though the sessions can also occur in a solitary manner. The training can be provided through in-house means but out-sourcing this specialized topic is very popular. Many training organizations offer this type of service i.e., Chorda Inc., Dana Mediation Institute, Conflict Management Plus Ltd., to name a few. There are also many resources such as videos and packaged training courses that organizations can purchase for in-house training from organizations (Business Training Media.com).

Another style is the coaching approach, in addition to the training classes. The coaching system is designed to help build awareness and teach employees how to take personal responsibility instead of just following some rules or recommendations espoused during a training program (Noble, 2005).

All organizations have different needs when it comes to educating their workforce on managing interpersonal conflict. Some educational approaches are more effective

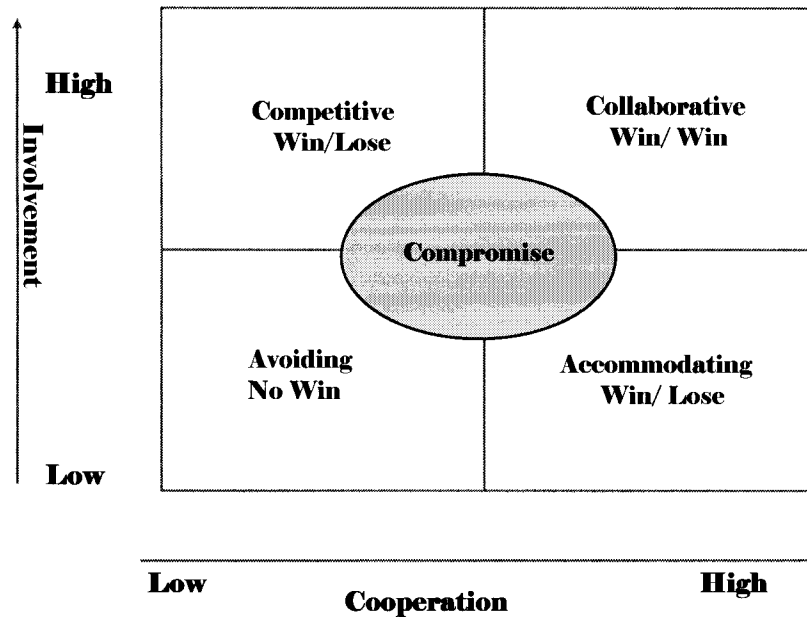
than others; however, the organization must weight the cost and benefit of each approach to determine what best suits them financially (Noble, 2005). Certainly the quality of training to be obtained can vary among similar programs, and thus impact their overall effectiveness. Organizations looking to proactively pursue CM must determine what objectives they would like to achieve, their budgeting allowance, and then find the right program to fit their needs (“Using training effectively,” 2004).

### **Conflict Management Strategies**

There are many well accepted strategies that people use to manage conflict. In the workplace, employees can respond unconsciously (natural reactions) or can choose a response that would be most strategic to the situation. Employees instructed on response strategies tend to be better equipped in handling conflict situations. They understand which should be applied at the right time (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2000).

There exists a commonly accepted theory on CM strategies. It has been called the “Dual Concern” theory or “Conflict Styles.” Regardless of name or terminologies their similar structure considers two opposing levels of concern. The first concern is for one’s self and level of involvement in the situation. The second concern is for others and the amount of cooperation that will be given to them. When placing these two concerns on opposing axes, the different level comparisons result in four or five different CM strategies. These strategies are often called compete (competitive, competition, confronting, forcing, and aggression), accommodate (yielding or smoothing), collaborative (problem solving), avoid, and compromise (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2000; “Lesson 2...,” n.d.; McCormick, 2002; Moore, n.d.; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). A reason for the possible fifth, compromise, is that some researchers feel that it does not actively

pursue a long term resolution to the situation and therefore is not a viable alternative to managing conflict (Conerly & Tripathi, 2004). Figure 1 demonstrates a comparison of a person's (or group's) concern with "involvement" and "cooperation" with another person (or group) in a conflict situation, thus demonstrating the type of strategy used (Inscoc & Harvin, 2004).



**Figure 1. Conflict Strategy Matrix**

Considering the CM strategy theory and Figure 1, an employee is in a conflict situation where they must be highly involved (high involvement) in the outcome decisions. This employee is not concerned about cooperating with others (low cooperation). The conflict strategy that naturally results is competitive or competition. At first this conflict strategy may seem ineffective or even more problem causing than before. The strategy should only be used in the right situation. For example, if this were a conflict between two employees trying to win the same sales contract, it would cause problems for management. If this were a situation where a supervisor had to terminate a

person's employment, then this strategy would be correct. It would be inappropriate for a supervisor to use the accommodating or avoiding strategy at that time. This model is based on natural reactions and what trained reactions should be. When an employee understands the pros and cons of each reaction, better decisions can be made, thus turning it into a strategy.

Another important strategy of CM is listening skills. Authentic listening indicates concern for the other person and relays empathy to the speaker. Listening helps one glean important information and find ways to resolve the conflict situation that may have been overlooked. Listening provides confidence and control to individuals in a conflict situation ("Conflict resolution strategies," 1998; Cloke & Goldsmith, 2000).

Using these strategies to handle conflict is the first step towards creating a resolution. It can be thought of a construct to the difficult conversation and what attitude the employee should take. These strategies do not explain how to verbally communicate in an effective manner. A manager could use the correct strategy, competitive, for terminating an employee, but the conversation can erupt in conflict if the manager does not chose his/her words carefully.

### **Verbal Mitigation Techniques**

Conflict can often be abated or avoided through the proper use of words. Most any CM training will recommend certain verbal approaches for common types of conflict situations. There are a wide variety of verbal techniques to mitigate difficult conversations. Most carry the same purpose, creating an atmosphere of cooperation and openness (Swimmer, 1995). Resolution cannot occur until defenses are brought down and an open line of authentic communication begins. Conflict in a conversation is a form

of self protection. American's are taught socially to always win and never lose.

Exposure of vulnerabilities is the quickest way to lose; so many feel their defenses must be maintained and they cannot back down from their position (Carter, 1999). The well known Biblical quote, "A soft word turns away wrath" does a great job describing the need to verbally deflect anger and focus on how to resolve the situation. Some examples of verbal mitigation techniques complete this section.

A style of verbal mitigation would be to remove blame and accusation when addressing an uncomfortable topic with another person. The technique does not side-step the issue but simply makes the message easier to give and receive (Bacal, n.d.). A good example is using "I" or neutral statements versus saying "you." Even though the addressee's intention is not to lay blame when saying something like, "You did this incorrectly," it tends to make the other person feel defensive. When a person is defensive, they can be uncooperative and unwilling to take personal responsibility for their actions (denial). Changing the phrasing to a neutral setting, "This was done incorrectly," does not attack the other person's character but still directly handles the issue (Anderson, Foster-Kuehn, & Mckinney, 1996; Swimmer, 1995).

Another mitigation approach is anticipating what the other person might say and then mentioning it up front when presenting the concern. An example would be, "John, I believe you probably don't realize it, but I feel offended when you call me baby." It keeps the other person from retaliating with their excuse like, "I didn't know you felt that way, why didn't you say so before!," but more importantly shows that you considered their feelings or perspective before you talked to them (Bratton, 2004; Swimmer, 1995).

A third approach is verbalizing what you see in the body language of the other person. Mixed signals between words and body language usually indicate that the speaker is not honest in stating what they feel or believe. For example, if you ask another person to agree with you and they say, “Yes” with a big sigh or look away, then most likely they do not really agree. A correct action the speaker should take at that point is describing what they saw occur. For example, “John, I know you just said you agreed with me but I get the feeling that may not really be the case. Could you explain to me what your hesitations are?” At this point, the other person will more likely share their true feelings. It may not be something we want to hear, but it gets to the root of problem and then steps can be taken to resolve it (Jones, 1996).

A final verbal technique is one that is more of a concept than an actual type of phrasing. It is a verbal communication of respect for other people in everyday conversations. This means treating others as equals, not in responsibility or rank, but as human beings. Threatening, condescending, and demanding will get results for a short time but ultimately result in dissention and conflict. Training employees on how to respect each other (diversity or sensitivity training) eliminates many problems (Siu, 2004).

### **Training Evaluation**

CM is obviously an important issue for companies that want to maintain a productive workforce. Organizations that ignore workplace conflict often do not realize its negative financial impact. Key indicators like turnover, absenteeism, and low worker morale should be considered as symptoms to a deeper problem, one, which could be poorly managed conflict among co-workers and supervisors (“What is the cost...”, n.d.).

Since CM training is not directly aligned with job task performance, it can be difficult for management to justify its expenditure. Consider training for a production line worker using a new piece of equipment. The increased output can be measured and the investment justified. With conflict training, like most soft skills training, it does not show immediate or definitive results. In addition, it is difficult and time consuming to produce a solid financial figure of return on investment, even when a visible improvement has been seen (Jasrotia, 2000). This last portion of the literature review explains common practices for evaluating training and determining if and how any impact was made.

Evaluating the effectiveness of training is a heavily researched topic that began in earnest in the 1960s (Nickols, 2000). There are two types of evaluation. One occurs while the curriculum is being developed and the initial sessions are being conducted (formative evaluation). The other looks at the end results and the lasting impact the training has made on performance (summative evaluation). It is with both of these types of evaluation that the curriculum and instructional strategies are modified to produce the best return on investment (ROI).

In the formal setting of formative training, the curriculum is developed based on the business's needs assessment, then reviewed by other professionals in the field of education, its specific subject matter, and the management of those who are being trained. When there is an agreement on the curriculum, a few test sessions (beta sessions) are conducted. Any further modifications are made based on trainer and trainee feedback of the sessions (Wa-Mbaleka, 2004; Chevalier, n.d.).



Business management and HRD professionals are more familiar with the summative type of training evaluation. A universal evaluation process is the four level Kirkpatrick Model (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Some similar evaluation models include a fifth level, but the approach is the same as the fourth level (the last level is separated into two parts instead of one) (Chevalier, 2005). The first level is called reaction, and it measures if the learners enjoyed the session. This is based upon a learning principle that if the learners were engaged and enjoyed the session, it is more likely that they retained the information being taught (Jones, Valdez, Nowakowski, & Rasmussen, 1994). The second level is called learning (or knowledge). It evaluates how much content was retained by the trainees. The simplest way to perform this evaluation is to test the trainees' knowledge of the course's learning objectives. In many businesses, the level of training evaluation usually stops at this point. Further evaluation requires time and money, and when considering the financial return, not all training sessions need to be evaluated in the last two levels. American Society of Training and Development's (ASTD) 2004 "State of the Industry" reported that organizations perform these two levels of evaluation 74% and 31% of the time (Sugrue & Kim, 2004). For organizations that need to verify, with documentation, if the training has impacted the actions and attitudes of their employees, that is when a third level is conducted. It is called behavior (or "transfer of learning" to the workplace). Financial figures are only represented in the final level of evaluation called results, business impact, and/or ROI. It assesses the cost of the entire training program and compares it to the financial gain of the employee's changed behaviors. This level of evaluation is a comprehensive, long term process. It contains a level of subjectivity and a huge amount of data for analyzing. ASTD's 2004

“State of the Industry” also reported that organizations perform this level of evaluation only 8% of the time (Kim & Sugrue, 2004).

### **Summary**

Poorly managed conflict can cause a company to suffer in productivity and profits. CM is largely the responsibility of HR, and training is a common approach for dealing with the issue. CM training often includes a theory of conflict reactions demonstrated through two levels of opposing needs (involvement and cooperation). Knowledge of these reactions and what are appropriate responses turn it into strategy for the situation. Properly established strategy, verbal techniques and listening skills help employees create an environment of openness and communication during the conflict situation. The final portion of the literature review addressed how training is usually evaluated, which builds a foundation for the Methods and Procedures chapter of this study.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methods and Procedures**

The purpose of this study was to determine if Virginia Quality Institute's conflict management training attendees were successful in using the recommended conflict strategies and verbal techniques to mitigate difficult conversations and conflict situations at their job. This chapter explains the methods and procedures used to collect research information from the training class attendees. The information is in reference to how they have handled their workplace conflict experiences since the training. The following sections to be examined are population, instrument design, methods of data collection, and statistical analysis.

#### **Population**

The population of this study consisted of 47 employees in three Hampton Roads, Virginia, organizations and three industries. The industries were a local city government agency, a manufacturing company, and a non-profit organization. Each employer selected the employees that attended the CM training. All but one class was taught to employees who were supervisors. Since the population of the study group was small, all training attendees were surveyed.

The conflict management training sessions were purchased from VQI by the employers, which hereafter will be called "client." One to two months prior to each session, VQI and the client confirmed the location, time, and number of participants for the training. A total of four training sessions were conducted, one session per client. An exception was a client who had the training program conducted twice for two groups of employees.

## Instrument Design

The instrument chosen to collect data was a survey. Though there are many ways to collect data for a level three training evaluation, the survey method offered the researcher a way that was least intrusive to the clients and their employees.

The study's research goals outlined the structure of the survey's 16 questions. The first question asked the survey participants to rate how equipped they felt in handling workplace conflict. The second question asked the participants to rate their effort in using what was taught. The ratings were based on a ten-point scale from poor to outstanding. Both questions were selected because they indicated the participant's willingness to apply the training in comparison to how equipped they felt to do so. The first two questions addressed the first two research goals of the study which were how equipped did the trainee feel about handling conflict and how much effort did they use implementing what they had learned.

Each of the next seven questions in the survey asked for two responses. The questions described a verbal mitigation technique and asked how often the participants used it. Then it asked how beneficial the technique was in removing emotional defenses and encouraging verbal communication with the other party in the conflict. These questions indicated which mitigation techniques were used the most often and which mitigation techniques were the most successful upon application. The questions' force choice answers are listed as follows:

*Answer choices for how often they used each verbal mitigation technique:*

1. Never
2. Rarely

3. Sometimes
4. Often
5. Almost always

*Answer choices for how beneficial they found each technique to be:*

1. Does not apply
2. Poor Outcome
3. Could not tell
4. Worked sometimes
5. Worked well

These questions addressed the third research goal which was to determine success in using the recommended verbal mitigation techniques.

Each of the last seven questions in the survey asked for two responses. The questions described a common workplace conflict, and the participants had to think of a specific corresponding situation they had recently experienced. With the situation in mind, the participants then explained which conflict strategy they applied. The second response requested the participants to gauge how beneficial the selected strategy was in producing results and maintaining an appropriate work relationship with the other party. The questioning was structured to compare the participant's conflict situation with their choice of strategy. It was designed to determine if they used recommended strategy taught in training. Requesting that they think of a specific incident instead of using the general concept demonstrated their behavior, not knowledge of what would be the appropriate response. The second response demonstrated the effectiveness of the strategies chosen. It was designed to determine when the wrong strategy was used, was it

was less effective than the correct strategy. The questions' force choice answers are listed as follows:

*Answer choices for conflict strategies:*

1. Accommodate
2. Compete
3. Collaborate
4. Compromise
5. Avoid
6. Have not experienced this conflict

*Answer choices for how beneficial they found the selected strategy to be:*

1. Does not apply
2. Poor Outcome
3. Could not tell
4. Worked sometimes
5. Worked well

These questions addressed the fourth research goal, which was to determine success in using the appropriate conflict strategy for larger multi-dimensional conflict situations.

All of the questions in the survey were structured to reveal the natural behavior of the training participants. The survey was not intended to evaluate knowledge retention. The question's responses demonstrated if the CM training techniques or strategies were used, and if so were they successful in achieving the trainees' desired results. The actionability of the questions helped VQI make decisions on what changes or adjustments were

most beneficial for future training attendees' learning experiences. A copy of the survey was made available in Appendix A.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

VQI supplied the instructor, materials, and curriculum to conduct the four-hour training session. Three to six months after each training session, the participants received an email survey from VQI requesting information on how they used what they learned. It was conducted with the client's permission, the training participants' organization leader (training manager, director, president, etc...) or authorizer of the training purchase. To encourage participation, the supervisors of the employees were sometimes CC (copied) into the email when deemed appropriate.

Survey respondent confidentiality was ensured through the software program that conducted the survey, Perseus Survey Solutions 6. The software was designed to create the survey questionnaire in an HTML format so the final version for the participants contained easy-to-use drop boxes, comment fields, choice buttons, check boxes, etc... to collect the responses. When the participants opened the email they selected answers directly on the page. No request for personal information was included. When the questions were answered, the participant clicked on the "submit survey" button at the bottom of the email. They could not send a reply email with selected responses (did not work). When they clicked the button, an automatic email with the generated data was sent to an online Perseus database then automatically forwarded to the survey administrator (investigator). The email received by the administrator contained an email address from Perseus, a subject field with the project code, and the single submission response data in the body.

The software provided a special database program to collect responses. It automatically reviewed the administrator's email inbox; looking for the project code then the data from the emails were automatically added to the administrator's assigned survey project database.

When the investigator experienced a low response rate, a re-forwarded email survey with a reminder was sent to all participants. Sometimes it was sent to the participant's supervisor or organization leader asking them to give a friendly reminder. Survey participation was voluntary so any enforcement was conducted in-house by the organization leaders, all of who were promised a copy of the completed research report.

Participation incentives were another tool used to encourage responses. They were offered to each group surveyed. A \$5 gift certificate was awarded to participants who emailed the investigator a designated secret phrase. The investigator's email address and the secret phrase were supplied on the "thank you" message provided upon submission of the survey. The option of emailing the investigator was voluntary and could not be related to the survey submission.

### **Statistical Analysis**

Upon completion of the survey the results were calculated manually with the use of two statistical formulas. To determine the level of correlation between the trainees' effort in applying what they learned and how equipped they felt to use it, the formula Pearson's  $r$  made the comparison. To determine the level of significance in the frequency of using the verbal mitigation techniques and its resulting success, the formula Chi-Square made the comparison. The same was conducted for the correct conflict strategy use and its resulting success.



## **Summary**

The population of the study was small so all training attendees were asked to participate. Since they were employed by three different organizations, an email survey was determined to be the most effective and non-intrusive format for data collection. The questioning in the survey was specifically designed to determine the behavior of the participant in a conflict situation and its resulting effects. Its 16 survey questions were outlined by the research goals of the study. The data collection instrument was Survey Solutions 6 through Perseus, a software program that created the HTML email survey and collected responses. The process was entirely anonymous and voluntary for the participant. The findings of the study were analyzed to determine significance using the formulas of Pearson's  $r$  and Chi-Square. The data collected in the survey were presented in the following chapter, Findings, of this study.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine if VQI's conflict management training attendees were successful in using the recommended conflict strategies and verbal techniques to mitigate difficult conversations and conflict situations at their job. The results of the data collected from the survey were presented in this chapter. The data were then used to answer the questions of the following research goals:

1. Did the trainees feel adequately equipped in the training session to use the recommended verbal techniques and conflict strategies?
2. How much effort did the trainees put into using what they were taught?
3. Were the trainees successful in using any of the seven recommended verbal techniques to mitigate difficult conversations?
4. Were the trainees successful in appropriately using one or more of the five recommended conflict strategies for larger or multi-dimensional conflict issues?

To collect this data, a survey of the CM training participants was conducted. The survey was administered three to six months after each training program was facilitated. The training program was taught to employees of three different VQI business clients that spanned three industries. All 47 of the training participants were surveyed. The survey consisted of 16 questions that were outlined by the study's research goals. The first question determined what kind of effort the training participant put into what they learned in the training course. The second question queried the participant if they felt adequately equipped in the training course to handle workplace conflict. The following seven questions determined the extent of use of the recommended verbal mitigation techniques,

and how effective they were in managing the conflict conversation. The last seven questions established the participant's appropriate use of conflict management strategies, and how effective they found their approach to be in handling each proposed situation.

### **Overview of Responses**

The total response rate of the survey was 48.9%; 23 of 47 surveys were completed. The spread of participant responses in each industry were 7, 9, and 7; government, non-profit, and manufacturing respectively. The data were collected throughout a 24 day period that began on June 10<sup>th</sup> 2005 and ended on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2005.

### **Explanation of Survey Results**

Table 1 displayed all responses to the first two survey questions and contained the data to answer the first two research questions. The survey questions requested rankings based on a ten point scale of poor to outstanding. The range of response for survey question one spanned from four to ten. The average response was 7.5 which indicated most participants felt reasonably equipped to handle conflict situations, thus it answered research question number one which queried how equipped participants felt. The range of response for survey question two also spanned from four to ten. The average response was 6.5 which indicated most participants felt they made some reasonable effort using the strategies and techniques taught in the training. This answered research question number two which queried how much effort the participants made.

To draw further conclusions from questions one and two response data, the formula Pearson's  $r$  was used to determine if there was a relationship (level of correlation) between the two rankings of data. The computed value was  $r = +0.71$ , and it exceeded the critical values of 0.3598 and 0.4921 respectively at the  $p > 0.05$  and  $p > 0.01$

confidence levels in the Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Table. Its degree of magnitude demonstrated a high correlation and dependable relationship, and thus provided the following findings pertaining to the research problem. A participant usually placed about as much effort into using what they learned as to how comfortable they felt in using it (felt equipped), or the participant felt more equipped to handle conflict once they employed the use of what they learned. A correlation between variables does not explain its cause and effect; therefore, other survey questions were developed to continue clarifying this problem.

**Table1. Feeling Equipped and Corresponding Amount of Effort Used**

<i>Ranking scale: 1 (poor) to 10 (outstanding)</i>	<b>Survey Question and Ranking</b> 1) How equipped they felt to handle conflict situations.	<b>Survey Question and Ranking</b> 2) The amount of effort they placed in using what they learned.
Survey Participant # 1	4	5
Survey Participant # 2	5	5
Survey Participant # 3	5	5
Survey Participant # 4	5	5
Survey Participant # 5	5	5
Survey Participant # 6	6	4
Survey Participant # 7	6	6
Survey Participant # 8	7	7
Survey Participant # 9	7	7
Survey Participant # 10	7	6
Survey Participant # 11	7	7
Survey Participant # 12	7	8
Survey Participant # 13	7	6
Survey Participant # 14	8	6
Survey Participant # 15	8	8
Survey Participant # 16	8	9
Survey Participant # 17	8	5
Survey Participant # 18	9	6
Survey Participant # 19	9	7
Survey Participant # 20	9	9
Survey Participant # 21	10	7
Survey Participant # 22	10	10
Survey Participant # 23	No Response	No Response

Table 2 displayed the responses to the seven survey questions regarding the use and success of the recommended verbal mitigation techniques. It supplied data to answer the third research question which queried if the participants were successful in using any of the seven recommended verbal techniques to mitigate difficult conversations. All participants used the “I” vs. “You” technique from survey question three, and it was rated a 4.0 average on a five point scale, which means it worked sometimes. For question four, all participants had attempted to verbalize their anticipation of the other person’s feelings and it was rated a 4.3 average, which means it worked a little more often than not. For question five, all participants used the other person’s personal interest to gain buy-in and it was rated a 4.0 average, which means it worked sometimes. For question six, all but two participants had verbalized what they saw in the other person’s body language and it was rated a 3.5 average, which means they usually could not tell a difference. For question seven, all participants used limit-setting statements to avoid confusion and it was rated a 4.3 average, which means it worked more often than not. For question eight, all participants discussed consequences of behavior with the other person and it was rated a 3.9 average, which means it worked sometimes. For question nine, all but two participants had been careful in choosing a proper physical location for meeting and use of personal body language during the conversation. It was rated a 4.2 average which means it worked a little more often than not. See Table 2.

Table 3 supplied additional data to answer the third research question. The data listed were the Chi-Square values computed from the range of responses received from each survey question regarding the verbal mitigation techniques (questions three through

**Table 2. Use and Perceived Success of Recommended Verbal Mitigation**

**Techniques**

**Question 3**

<i># of participants who used "I" vs. "You" technique</i>	<b>Total</b>	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always	Never
	<b>22</b>	1	13	7	1	0
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	0	0
(2) Poor outcome	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	0	0
(3) Could not tell	<b>6</b>	1	5	0	0	0
(4) Worked sometimes	<b>10</b>	0	7	2	1	0
(5) Worked well	<b>6</b>	0	1	5	0	0
<b>Mean response to ranking of perceived success – 4.0 – Worked sometimes</b>						

**Question 4**

<i># of participants who used Anticipate Feelings technique</i>	<b>Total</b>	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always	Never
	<b>22</b>	4	11	6	1	0
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	0	0
(2) Poor outcome	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	0	0
(3) Could not tell	<b>4</b>	1	3	0	0	0
(4) Worked sometimes	<b>16</b>	3	8	5	0	0
(5) Worked well	<b>2</b>	0	0	1	1	0
<b>Mean response to ranking of perceived success – 4.3 – Worked more often than not</b>						

**Question 5**

<i># of participants who used Personal Interest technique</i>	<b>Total</b>	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always	Never
	<b>22</b>	1	9	8	4	0
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	0	0
(2) Poor outcome	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	0	0
(3) Could not tell	<b>4</b>	1	1	2	0	0
(4) Worked sometimes	<b>13</b>	0	7	4	2	0
(5) Worked well	<b>5</b>	0	1	2	2	0
<b>Mean response to ranking of perceived success – 4.0 – Worked sometimes</b>						

**Question 6**

<i># of participants who used Body Language technique</i>	<b>Total</b>	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always	Never
	<b>23</b>	8	9	4	0	2
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	<b>3</b>	1	0	0	0	2
(2) Poor outcome	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	0	0
(3) Could not tell	<b>9</b>	7	2	0	0	0
(4) Worked sometimes	<b>11</b>	0	7	4	0	0
(5) Worked well	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Mean response to ranking of perceived success – 3.5 – Usually could not tell a difference</b>						

Table 2 continued.

**Question 7**

<i># of participants who used Limit Setting technique</i>	<b>Total 23</b>	Rarely 3	Sometimes 6	Often 11	Almost Always 3	Never 0
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	1	1	0	0	0	0
(2) Poor outcome	1	1	0	0	0	0
(3) Could not tell	2	1	1	0	0	0
(4) Worked sometimes	9	0	5	4	0	0
(5) Worked well	10	0	0	7	3	0
<b>Mean response to ranking of perceived success – 4.3 – Worked more often than not</b>						

**Question 8**

<i># of participants who used Consequences technique</i>	<b>Total 23</b>	Rarely 5	Sometimes 11	Often 5	Almost Always 2	Never 0
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	2	2	0	0	0	0
(2) Poor outcome	1	1	0	0	0	0
(3) Could not tell	3	1	2	0	0	0
(4) Worked sometimes	13	1	8	3	1	0
(5) Worked well	4	0	1	2	1	0
<b>Mean response to ranking of perceived success – 3.9 – Worked Sometimes</b>						

**Question 9**

<i># of participants who used Private Location technique</i>	<b>Total 23</b>	Rarely 3	Sometimes 5	Often 7	Almost Always 6	Never 2
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	2	0	0	0	0	2
(2) Poor outcome	0	0	0	0	0	0
(3) Could not tell	2	2	0	0	0	0
(4) Worked sometimes	12	0	5	6	1	0
(5) Worked well	7	1	0	1	5	0
<b>Mean response to ranking of perceived success – 4.2 – Worked more often than not</b>						

nine). It determined if there was a difference between how much each technique was used to how successful the users perceived each technique to be. The computed values were accepted as significant at the minimum critical values of 3.840 and 6.640 at the  $p>0.05$  and  $p>0.01$  levels in the Chi-Square values table. The data demonstrated at the  $p>0.05$  level that of five out of the seven techniques did contain a difference between its use and perceived success; therefore, they were to be found more effective when used more often and less effective when used less often. The five techniques that contained a

difference were Personal Interest, Body Language, Limit Setting, Consequences, and Private Location. The two techniques that did not show any difference were “I” vs “You” and Anticipate Feelings.

**Table 3. Chi-Square Values for Difference Between Mitigation Technique**

**Use and Success**

Technique	Use: Sometimes, Often, Almost Always	Use: Sometimes, Often, Almost Always	Use: Never, Rarely	Use: Never, Rarely	Chi- Square Value	p>0.05	p>0.01
	Success: Worked Sometimes/ Well	Success: Poor outcome, Could not tell	Success: Worked Sometimes/ Well	Success: Poor outcome, Could not tell			
3) “I” vs. “You”	16	5	0	1	X <sup>2</sup> = 2.790	No	No
4) Anticipate Feelings	15	3	3	1	X <sup>2</sup> = 0.153	No	No
5) Personal Interest	18	3	0	1	X <sup>2</sup> = 4.714	Yes	No
6) Body Language	11	2	0	7	X <sup>2</sup> = 14.478	Yes	Yes
7) Limit Setting	19	1	0	2	X <sup>2</sup> = 13.933	Yes	Yes
8) Conse- quences	16	2	1	2	X <sup>2</sup> = 5.392	Yes	No
9) Private Location	18	2	1	2	X <sup>2</sup> = 5.577	Yes	No

Table 4 displayed participant responses to situations of workplace conflict they had specifically experienced, and the outcome (success or failure) of using their chosen conflict approach. The table supplied data from the last seven survey questions to answer the fourth and last research question of the study which queried if the trainees were successful in appropriately using one or more of the five recommended conflict strategies



for larger or multi-dimensional conflict issues. Each workplace conflict scenario had a recommended conflict strategy that was taught in the training course.

Question 10 was rated 3.7 on a five point scale for the recommended approach of compete. These participants had experienced a conflict where they felt their position on the issue was vital. They felt the strategy worked little to their success because they often could not tell a difference. Question 11 was rated 4.1 for the recommended approach of compromise. This was when they experienced conflict due to valid concerns, but had limited time to resolve it. They felt the strategy worked sometimes. Question 12 was rated 4.4 for the recommended approach of collaborate. This was when they experienced conflict where both sides' concerns were of equal importance. They felt it worked more often than not. Question 13 was rated 2.0 for the recommended approach of avoid. This was when they experienced conflict where emotions were uncontrolled and irrational behavior occurred. They felt it had a poor outcome. Question 14 was rated 4.2 for the recommended approach of accommodate. This was when they experienced a conflict where the outcome was not very important to them. They felt the strategy worked sometimes. Question 15 was rated 3.7 for the recommended approach of accommodate. This was when they experienced a conflict where they had no power to influence the situation, though the outcome could impact them. They could not tell a difference when using it. Question 16 was rated 2.6 for not using the avoid strategy (as recommended in the training course) when they experienced a relationship where their personal emotions made it difficult to work with the other person. Question 16's other strategy options collectively were rated 2.5. They felt most any response in this scenario worked little to their success.

**Table 4. Use and Perceived Success of Recommended Conflict Strategies**

**Question 10**

<i>Strategies participants selected for Vital Issue conflict</i>	Did not experience	Accommodated	<b>Competed</b>	Collaborated	Compromised	Avoided
	9	0	<b>4</b>	7	2	1
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	9	0	<b>0</b>	0	0	0
(2) Poor outcome	0	0	<b>0</b>	0	0	1
(3) Could not tell	0	0	<b>2</b>	0	0	0
(4) Worked sometimes	0	0	<b>1</b>	6	1	0
(5) Worked well	0	0	<b>1</b>	1	1	0
<b>Mean response of perceived success using correct Compete strategy – 3.7 – Often could not tell</b>						

**Question 11**

<i>Strategies participants selected for Limited Time conflict</i>	Did not experience	Accommodated	Competed	Collaborated	<b>Compromised</b>	Avoided
	10	3	1	2	<b>7</b>	0
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	10	0	0	0	<b>0</b>	0
(2) Poor outcome	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>	0
(3) Could not tell	0	1	0	0	<b>1</b>	0
(4) Worked sometimes	0	2	1	1	<b>4</b>	0
(5) Worked well	0	0	0	1	<b>2</b>	0
<b>Mean response of perceived success using correct Compromise strategy – 4.1 – Worked Sometimes</b>						

**Question 12**

<i>Strategies participants selected for Equal Importance conflict</i>	Did not experience	Accommodated	Competed	<b>Collaborated</b>	Compromise	Avoided
	12	2	0	<b>5</b>	4	0
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	12	0	0	<b>0</b>	0	0
(2) Poor outcome	0	0	0	<b>0</b>	0	0
(3) Could not tell	0	1	0	<b>0</b>	0	0
(4) Worked sometimes	0	1	0	<b>3</b>	3	0
(5) Worked well	0	0	0	<b>2</b>	1	0
<b>Mean response of perceived success using correct Collaborate strategy – 4.4 – Worked more often than not</b>						

**Question 13**

<i>Strategies participants selected for Irrational Actions conflict</i>	Did not experience	Accommodated	Competed	Collaborated	Compromised	<b>Avoided</b>
	14	1	1	2	2	<b>3</b>
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	14	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
(2) Poor outcome	0	1	0	0	0	<b>3</b>
(3) Could not tell	0	0	1	0	0	<b>0</b>
(4) Worked sometimes	0	0	0	1	2	<b>0</b>
(5) Worked well	0	0	0	1	0	<b>0</b>
<b>Mean response of perceived success using correct Avoid strategy – 2.0 – Poor Outcome</b>						

Table 4 continued.

**Question 14**

<i>Strategies participants selected for conflict that was not very important</i>	Did not experience	<b>Accommodated</b>	Competed	Collaborated	Compromised	Avoided
	4	<b>8</b>	1	0	10	0
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	4	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	0
(2) Poor outcome	0	<b>1</b>	0	0	0	0
(3) Could not tell	0	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	0
(4) Worked sometimes	0	<b>3</b>	1	0	6	0
(5) Worked well	0	<b>4</b>	0	0	4	0
<b>Mean response of perceived success using correct Accommodate strategy – 4.2 – Worked Sometimes</b>						

**Question 15**

<i>Strategies participants selected for conflict where they had no power</i>	Did not experience	<b>Accommodated</b>	Competed	Collaborated	Compromised	Avoided
	6	<b>8</b>	0	1	5	2
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	6	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	1
(2) Poor outcome	0	<b>1</b>	0	0	0	0
(3) Could not tell	0	<b>2</b>	0	0	1	1
(4) Worked sometimes	0	<b>3</b>	0	1	3	0
(5) Worked well	0	<b>2</b>	0	0	1	0
<b>Mean response of perceived success using correct Accommodate strategy – 3.7 – Often could not tell</b>						

**Question 16**

<i>Strategies participants selected for managing conflict containing personal emotions</i>	Did not experience	<b>Accommodated</b>	Competed	Collaborated	Compromised	Avoid
	11	<b>2</b>	1	0	3	6
<b>Success Ranking</b>						
(1) Does not apply	11	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	1
(2) Poor outcome	0	<b>1</b>	0	0	0	3
(3) Could not tell	0	<b>0</b>	1	0	1	1
(4) Worked sometimes	0	<b>1</b>	0	0	2	0
(5) Worked well	0	<b>0</b>	0	0	0	1
<b>Mean response of perceived success using any strategy except Avoid– 2.6 – Poor Outcome</b>						
<b>Mean response of perceived success using the incorrect strategy Avoid– 2.5 – Poor Outcome</b>						

Table 5 supplied additional data to answer the fourth and last research question.

The data listed were the Chi-Square values computed from the range of responses received from each of the last seven survey questions (10 through 16). It determined if there was a significant difference between the successes of using the correct

(recommended) and incorrect (not recommended) strategy types for each scenario. The computed values were accepted as significant at the minimum critical values of 3.840 and 6.640 at the  $p>0.05$  and  $p>0.01$  levels in the Chi-Square values table. The data demonstrated that none of the conflict scenarios maintained a particular strategy to be more beneficial than the use of any other strategy.

**Table 5. Chi-Square Values for Difference Between Correct and Incorrect**

**Conflict Strategy Options**

	Correct Strategy	Correct Strategy	Incorrect Strategy	Incorrect Strategy			
Scenario	Success: Worked Sometimes/ Well	Success: Poor outcome, Could not tell	Success: Worked Sometimes/ Well	Success: Poor outcome, Could not tell	Chi-Square Value	$p>0.05$	$p>0.01$
10) Vital Issue	2	2	9	1	$X^2 = 2.710$	No	No
11) Limited Time	6	1	5	1	$X^2 = 0.014$	No	No
12) Equal Importance	5	0	5	1	$X^2 = 1.320$	No	No
13) Irrational Actions	0	3	3	2	$X^2 = 2.880$	No	No
14) Not Very Important	7	1	11	0	$X^2 = 0.192$	No	No
15) No Power	5	3	5	2	$X^2 = 0.134$	No	No
16) Personal Emotions	1	4	3	3	$X^2 = 1.061$	No	No

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to determine if VQI's conflict management training attendees were successful in using the recommended conflict strategies and verbal

techniques to mitigate difficult conversations and conflict situations at their job. The purpose was accomplished by conducting a survey with the training participants, three to six months after the session. In this chapter the results of the survey were collected and reported. Chapter V will provide a summary of this study's goals, significance, limitations, population, and instrument along with conclusions and recommendations that resulted from the interpretation of the collected data.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to determine if Virginia Quality Institute's conflict management training attendees were successful in using the recommended conflict strategies and verbal techniques to mitigate difficult conversations and conflict situations at their job. This chapter summarizes the procedures used in this research, will draw conclusions concerning those research findings, and make recommendations based on those findings.

#### **Summary**

Managing workplace conflict was not a new concept. Organizations have seen the financial benefits of addressing this issue, so many have formalized systems to train and/or channel these problems in a more productive manner. VQI was a small non-profit organization that provided customized training services to Hampton Roads, Virginia, businesses. One of their commonly requested training programs was their conflict management course.

The significance of this research impacts both VQI and each client for whom the conflict management training is performed. For VQI, they can better determine any curriculum needs or show there is an opportunity for increasing the transfer of learning to the workplace. The significance for each client is a clearer picture of the value of their investment. This is very important to training managers who need to justify their expenditures and return on investment.

The research study was limited to workplace communication issues in which the individuals did not become physically violent with each other. Though some of the

concepts taught in the training program can be used in conflict resolution processes, VQI's training focused on how to better communicate during difficult workplace conversations. The CM training program was approximately 90% off-the-shelf and 10% modified for client needs. It was strictly a maximum of four hours in length.

The population of this study consisted of 47 employees in three Hampton Roads, Virginia, organizations and three industries. The CM training sessions were purchased from VQI by the employers. Each employer selected the employees that attended the training. The training participants were either front-line employees or supervisors and there was a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, ages, and work experiences among them. Since the population of the study group was small, all available training attendees were asked to participate in the study.

The instrument chosen to collect data was an email survey. The survey method offered the researcher a way to collect data that was least intrusive to the clients and their employees. Data collected from the survey was used to answer the questions of the study's research goals. The research goals were as follows:

1. Did the trainees feel adequately equipped in the training session to use the recommended verbal techniques and conflict strategies?
2. How much effort did the trainees put into using what they were taught?
3. Were the trainees successful in using any of the seven recommended verbal techniques to mitigate difficult conversations?
4. Were the trainees successful in appropriately using one or more of the five recommended conflict strategies for larger or multi-dimensional conflict issues?

The 16 questions in the survey were designed as follows:

The first question asked the survey participants to rate how equipped they felt in handling workplace conflict. The second question asked the participants to rate their effort in using what was taught. The following seven questions determined the extent of use of the recommended verbal mitigation techniques and how effective they were in managing the conflict situation. The last seven questions established the participant's appropriate use of conflict management strategies and how effective they found their approach to be in handling each proposed situation.

The survey was not intended to evaluate knowledge retention. The question's responses demonstrated when the CM training techniques or strategies were used and if they were successful in achieving the trainees' desired results.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this study conclude that the CM training course offered by VQI was able to equip the training attendees to be successful in using verbal techniques to mitigate difficult conversations in conflict situations at their job. Those who used the techniques often found them to be more successful than those who did not use them as often. Additional findings of this study are not able to conclude the same success with the training's recommended conflict strategies for larger or multi-dimensional conflict issues. It is concluded there was a weak transfer of the learning concept to the workplace.

### **Conclusion of Research Goal #1:**

Did the trainees feel adequately equipped in the training session to use the recommended verbal techniques and conflict strategies? The pertaining survey



question's average response of 7.5 (on a ten point scale) indicates most participants felt reasonably equipped to handle conflict situations. Therefore, the researcher can reasonably conclude that many of the participants felt the training concepts were satisfactorily conveyed to them.

### **Conclusion of Research Goal #2:**

How much effort did the trainees put into using what they were taught? The pertaining survey question's average response was 6.5 which indicated most participants felt they made some reasonable effort using the strategies and techniques taught in the training course. Therefore, the researcher can reasonably conclude that the participants used all or some of the techniques and strategies; however, most did not use them to the extent they could have.

The relationship of the responses to these two survey questions showed there was a high correlation (+0.71) between a participant feeling equipped in using the recommended conflict strategies and techniques and the amount of effort they placed into using what they had learned. Since a correlation of any strength does not explain the cause and effect of the relationship, other survey questions were developed to investigate this further. For example, when assuming the recommended verbal mitigation techniques were found successful upon the increase of its use (discussed in research goal #3), it therefore may be concluded the more active a participant makes the effort to apply what they learned, the more equipped they will be (and feel) able to appropriately handle verbal conflict situations. On the bases of the same correlation and assumption, for the participant rankings that were below the average of 6.5 (for the survey question regarding amount of effort), it may be concluded that the participant did not engage enough effort

to make the training recommendations of verbal mitigation techniques feel as successful to themselves.

### **Conclusion of Research Goal #3:**

Were the trainees successful in using any of the seven recommended verbal techniques to mitigate difficult conversations? The responses varied somewhat on the survey's seven questions, regarding the success of the recommended verbal mitigation techniques. Findings demonstrated six of the seven techniques were ranked on average as having worked for the participant at some point in their use (ranked 3.9 or higher on a 5 point scale). The only technique that did not show as much success upon use was verbalizing the other person's body language when they received mixed messages of words and physical demeanor (3.5 average ranking). Only half found the technique worked while the others saw no difference in the conflict situation. In summary, it can be concluded that all of the instructed verbal mitigation techniques work and demonstrate success, only some do this better than others.

Further conclusions can be drawn from the Chi-Square findings of the same seven survey questions. At the  $p > 0.05$  confidence level, five of the seven techniques showed there was a significant difference between how much the techniques were used and how successful they were perceived to be. The techniques of "I" vs. "You" and Anticipate Feelings were not accepted as significant in relationship to use; therefore, it may be concluded that if they are used more often, it will not necessarily be found to be more successful. However, the majority of participants who used these two techniques ranked them as being of benefit in many of their situations (4.0 and 4.3 average rankings) so the techniques are successful. The techniques of Personal Interest, Body Language, Limit

Setting, Consequences, and Private Location, at the same confidence level of  $p > 0.05$  did show a significant relationship between use and effectiveness. Therefore it can be concluded that the more often these verbal mitigation techniques are used, the greater benefit and success the user will find in dealing with conflict. In summary, the majority of participants found most techniques were beneficial to their conflict situations and their success increased upon the amount of its use.

For the study's first key conclusion, the participants felt the training concepts were satisfactorily conveyed to them and on average they made a reasonable effort to apply what they learned. Their amount of application effort and the feelings of being equipped are in relationship with each other. Most of the recommended verbal mitigation techniques' successes were related to their amount of use. Therefore, it is a reasonable key conclusion that those who apply their training and frequently use the recommended verbal techniques will be more successful and feel more equipped to handle conflict than those who do not apply what they learned as often.

#### **Conclusion of Research Goal #4:**

Were the trainees successful in appropriately using one or more of the five recommended conflict strategies for larger or multi-dimensional conflict issues? The findings of the last seven survey questions varied in success for the recommended strategies in selected conflict scenarios. Each survey question presented a common workplace conflict scenario. If the participant had experienced that conflict, they were to select what response (conflict strategy) they used in that situation. The intent of this questioning was to determine their behavior and if their learning transferred into action in the workplace.

Participants often could not tell a difference when employing the strategies of two survey questions (between 2.7 and 3.9 on a five point ranking scale). Another two survey question strategies had a poor outcome for the user (2.6 or below in ranking). Three survey question strategies worked sometimes to their favor (4.1 and above ranking) and collaboration was found to be the most successful with a 4.4 ranking. The Chi-Square test for each scenario found no difference in success between the use of correct and incorrect strategies. The individual responses showed some of the incorrect strategies worked better than what were recommended as correct.

The varied responses of the last seven survey questions demonstrate the recommended conflict strategies are not found to be significantly successful for the participants. However, the conclusions for research goals one and two demonstrate many of the participants felt the training concepts were satisfactorily conveyed to them. Also the participants used all or some of the techniques and strategies; however, most did not use them to the extent they could have. In addition to the first two research goals' conclusions the literature review substantiated that the strategies and their appropriate use are well accepted among academic and professional realms (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2000; "Lesson 2...", n.d.; McCormick, 2002; Moore, n.d.; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Therefore the second and last key conclusion of this study is the conflict strategies learning concept did not transfer strongly to the workplace. The participants felt equipped well enough but did not make the effort to often apply the correct strategy to their conflict situations and thus find success in their use. The conflict strategies model is based on natural reactions and what trained reactions should be. When an employee understands the pros and cons of each reaction, better decisions can be made, thus turning

it into a strategy. What the participants have to overcome is their natural tendency to use their preferred conflict style(s) as compared to a more appropriate one in an applicable situation (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations of implementing what has been learned and further research opportunities about conflict management are based upon the findings and conclusions of this study:

1. Since the first key conclusion demonstrated that the frequent use of the recommended verbal techniques showed successful results, that portion of the training content and instruction can continue largely unaltered. However, the second key conclusion demonstrated that the learning of the conflict strategies did not transfer to the workplace as well as the verbal techniques. In both of these instances (more strongly in the second one) the investigator feels that emphasis must be placed on supplying a way to position, encourage, and positively reinforce the transfer of learning back to the work environment. For positioning the learning, the instruction of the conflict strategies portion could provide better clarification or emphasis on the benefits of using each strategy appropriately (might require a change in instructional strategy). To encourage and positively reinforce the learning, three recommendations follow. First get the managers of the participants involved. When the managers are aware of the recommendations presented in training they can encourage their employees to act upon them in the workplace. Second have the participants support each other. Setting up a support system among those who attended the training would let them share their experiences and encourage each other to use what they learned. Third provide a

visible reminder such as a training aid that could be used as an easy reference for them during a conflict situation. The managers could also find this training aid useful for reinforcement in the training attendee's normal coaching or feedback sessions.

2. From the second key conclusion the investigator recommends further research to determine the effectiveness of using the recommended strategies for large or multi-dimensional conflict situations. The investigator believes that part of the reason for the inconsistency among the responses for the last seven survey questions regarding the conflict strategies was due to the survey's structure and complexity of the data to be uncovered. An alternative data collection method would be better suited to gain the detail and context of each conflict situation. The investigator recommends interviews or structured focus groups to obtain this additional insight. The following example supports the investigator's opinion of inadequate survey structure. One survey question asked participants how they handled a conflict situation where emotions were uncontrolled and irrational behavior occurred. In this conflict scenario one would generally expect to see unrestrained anger, profanity, and refusal to listen. Fifty-seven percent of the participants selected the incorrect answers (which they said worked) of collaborate and compromise. A real conflict situation containing irrational behavior is not an environment conducive to constructive conversation which is required for collaboration or compromise. This type of conflict would need to be avoided and perhaps, after everyone had calmed down, could then be worked out as a compromise. The response to this question showed there was a disconnection between what the scenario stated and what the participants actually experienced. Other survey questions contained similar responses that showed a

disconnection. The recommended alternative data collection methods would allow an investigator to further discern each participant's specific situation so it could be concluded what would have been the most applicable strategy based on conflict's details the recommended conflict strategies model.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Email Introductory Letter**

This is a survey from the training organization VQI. You participated in their Conflict Management class with the instructor Marguerite Inscoc approximately three months ago. This class discussed the value of conflict with the exercise “Lost at Sea,” and strategies on how to handle conflict (avoid, accommodate, compromise, compete, and collaborate). You also practiced techniques on how to communicate to others in a non-defensive format such as “I” vs. “You” language. VQI would like to know how useful the training has been for you in your job. Please respond to this email survey within three days of its receipt. It will take approximately ten minutes to complete.

Do not “reply” or “forward” this email. Please enter your answers and click the “submit survey” button. We greatly appreciate your feedback. All responses are completely anonymous and will go directly to a VQI Inc. database.

## Email Survey Text Version

Will be formally used in HTML format.

*On the provided ten point scale for each question, select your rank from poor (1) to outstanding (10).*

- 1) How adequately do you feel the course equipped you to handle conflict situations?
- 2) How would you rate the amount of effort you put into using what was taught?

*Please read the following questions then answer with the choices provided. Also describe, using the choices provided, how beneficial the techniques were to you.*

*Beneficial is defined by how effective you think the technique was in removing defensiveness and establishing openness in communication with the other party during the conflict situation (answer choices are below the questions).*

- 1) When addressing another person's inappropriate behavior (towards you or work related), how often do you consciously apply the "I" vs. "You" verbal mitigation technique?
- 2) When introducing a topic that you think might make the person feel defensive, how often do you state your anticipation of their feelings before discussing it?
- 3) When trying to gain support of another person for a particular situation or need, how often do you tie in their personal interest into the conversation?
- 4) When you notice in a conversation that the person is saying one thing but their body language says something else, how often have you checked your

assumptions by commenting to them what you see? For example: “Susan, I heard you say that you agree, but I get the feeling that may not be entirely true.”

- 5) When working with another person on a task, how often do you use specific limit-setting statements to avoid ambiguity (on items such as priority, deadline, expectation, etc...)?
- 6) How often are you able to state to another person, in a non-threatening manner, the consequence of their behavior and then follow through with appropriate actions if necessary?
- 7) When instigating a difficult conversation, how well have you been able to choose a private location and convey openness of communication that would include using appropriate body language?

*Answer choices for each question on how often they have used it:*

Never

Rarely

Sometimes

Often

Almost always

*Answer choices for each question on how beneficial they found it to be:*

Does not apply

Poor Outcome

Could not tell

Worked sometimes

Worked well



*The following questions are based on the Conflict Strategies model we discussed. Read each question and think of a specific instance where that situation occurred for you in the workplace. Choose your conflict response style and select your rating on how beneficial you found that response to be. Beneficial means when reflecting on the outcome of the conflict, did it produce the desired results and maintain an appropriate (positive) working relationship with the other party (answer choices are below the questions).*

Have you been in a conflict situation...

- 1) With a vital issue and you knew what was the right thing to do?
- 2) Where you realized that your side and the other side had some valid concerns but there was limited time to make a decision?
- 3) With a vital issue where you realized that your side and their side had concerns of equal importance so neither of you could afford to lose anything (e.g. quality and production)?
- 4) Where emotions seem to guide the conversation and one or both sides were not acting rational with words or behavior?
- 5) Where you would have preferred it your way, but you realized that it was not that important?
- 6) Where you would have preferred it your way, but you realized that you did not have the power to make it so?
- 7) Where it was difficult to work with the other person (people) for a time because of your personal emotions?

*Answer choices for each question on conflict response:*

Accommodate

Compete

Collaborate

Compromise

Avoid

Have not experienced this conflict

*Answer choices for each question on how beneficial they found it to be:*

Does not apply

Poor Outcome

Could not tell

Worked sometimes

Worked well

***Conflict Management Training Survey***

**This is a survey from the training organization VQI. You participated in their Conflict Management class with the instructor Marguerite Insoe approximately six months ago. This class discussed the value of conflict with the exercise “Lost at Sea,” and strategies on how to handle conflict (avoid, accommodate, compromise, compete, and collaborate). You also practiced techniques on how to communicate to others in a non-defensive format such as “I” vs. “You” language. VQI would like to know how useful the training has been for you in your job. Please respond to this email survey within three business days of its receipt. It will take approximately ten minutes to complete.**

**Do not “reply” or “forward” this email. Please enter your answers and click the “submit survey” button. We greatly appreciate your feedback. All responses are completely anonymous and will go directly to a VQI Inc. database.**

*On the provided ten point scale for each question, select your rank from poor (1) to outstanding (10).*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1) How adequately do you feel the course equipped you to handle conflict situations?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2) How would you rate the amount of effort you put into using what was taught?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Please read the following questions then answer with the choices provided. Also describe, using the choices provided, how beneficial the techniques were to you. Beneficial is defined by how effective you think the technique was in removing defensiveness and establishing openness in communication with the other party during the conflict situation. PLEASE RESPOND BASED ON YOUR EXPERIENCE SINCE THE TRAINING SESSION.**

**3) When addressing another person’s inappropriate behavior (towards you or work related), how often do you consciously apply the “I” vs. “You” verbal mitigation technique?**

How often...

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼

**4)** When introducing a topic that you think might make the person feel defensive, how often do you state your anticipation of their feelings before discussing it?

How often...

(Click here to choose) ▼

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼

**5)** When trying to gain support of another person for a particular situation or need, how often do you tie in their personal interest into the conversation?

How often...

(Click here to choose) ▼

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼

**6)** When you notice in a conversation that the person is saying one thing but their body language says something else, how often have you checked your assumptions by commenting to them what you see? For example: “Susan, I heard you say that you agree, but I get the feeling that may not be entirely true.”

How often...

(Click here to choose) ▼

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼

**7)** When working with another person on a task, how often do you use specific limit-setting statements to avoid ambiguity (on items such as priority, deadline, expectation, etc...)?

How often...

(Click here to choose) ▼

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼

**8)** How often are you able to state to another person, in a non-threatening manner, the consequence of their behavior and then follow through with appropriate actions if necessary?

How often...

(Click here to choose) ▼

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼

**9)** When instigating a difficult conversation, how well have you been able to choose a private location and convey openness of communication that would include using appropriate body language?

How often...

(Click here to choose) ▼

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼

**The following questions are based on the Conflict Strategies model we discussed. Read each question and think of a specific instance where that situation occurred for you in the workplace. Choose your conflict response style and select your rating on how beneficial you found that response to be. Beneficial means when reflecting on the outcome of the conflict, did it produce the desired results and maintain an appropriate (positive) working relationship with the other party. PLEASE RESPOND BASED ON YOUR EXPERIENCE SINCE THE TRAINING SESSION.**

**10)** Have you been in a conflict situation with a vital issue and you knew what was the right thing to do?

What was your response...

How beneficial was it...

**11)** Have you been in a conflict situation where you realized that your side and the other side had some valid concerns but there was limited time to make a decision?

What was your response...

How beneficial was it...

**12)** Have you been in a conflict situation with a vital issue where you realized that your side and their side had concerns of equal importance so neither of you could afford to lose anything (e.g. quality and production)?

What was your response...

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼

**13)** Have you been in a conflict situation where emotions seem to guide the conversation and one or both sides were not acting rational with words or behavior?

What was your response...

(Click here to choose) ▼

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼

**14)** Have you been in a conflict situation where you would have preferred it your way, but you realized that it was not that important?

What was your response...

(Click here to choose) ▼

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼



**15)** Have you been in a conflict situation where you would have preferred it your way, but you realized that you did not have the power to make it so?

What was your response...

(Click here to choose) ▼

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼

**16)** Have you been in a conflict situation where it was difficult to work with the other person (people) for a time because of your personal emotions?

What was your response...

(Click here to choose) ▼

How beneficial was it...

(Click here to choose) ▼

**Your response is greatly appreciated. Please wait a moment after clicking the response button to receive a confirmation of survey submission.**

Submit Survey