



# Book Review: *Conflict Coaching Fundamentals: Working with Conflict Stories*

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## ABSTRACT

Often people adopt conflict narratives that can hijack their ability to work through conflict in a productive and constructive way. This review provides a summary of the melodramatic and tragedy conflict narratives that are the foundation of the book. In addition to describing these two narrative types, techniques and strategies for breaking free from the unproductive melodramatic conflict narrative in favor of the more productive tragedy narrative are presented using the REAL Conflict Coaching System developed by the author. Overall, this is a useful book for professional Ombuds to help visitors regain

some degree of empowerment over workplace conflict.

## KEYWORDS

Conflict narratives, melodramatic, tragedy, REAL Conflict Coaching System



As Ombuds, an integral part of our job is to listen to conflict narratives to help empower visitors to develop self-competence and confidence to handle issues by exploring, deconstructing and rebuilding their conflict stories. This book, authored by Samantha Hardy, PhD, describes strategies to help visitors transform how they frame and see themselves as passive and helpless in a conflict situation to active agents in their own story. Part 1 of the book describes two common conflict narratives (melodramatic and tragedy). Part 2 of the book describes a strategy to help visitors shift from a counter-productive melodramatic narrative to one that instills greater agency, the tragedy narrative. Overall, the book is written broadly for professionals who serve clients in conflict (e.g., lawyers, mediators, etc.). The framework and guidelines offered are equally helpful for Ombuds.

In Part 1, Hardy suggests that people who share a conflict story often adopt a melodramatic narrative story format with the narrator playing a virtuous heroine who is innocent, passive and helpless in the situation. Other characters in the story include a villain who is evil and puts the heroine's virtue in peril, a father figure who is responsible for rescuing the helpless heroine and restoring the moral order and the bumbling helper who serves as a passive character who fully supports the heroine. The melodramatic plot commences with the heroine feeling happy, followed by the villain doing something to deliberately upset them, and ends with the villain being punished so that the virtuous heroine triumphs. Hardy argues that this narrative format limits the agency of the storyteller by casting themselves as the victim who is helpless, passive and needs to be rescued. The author suggests the importance of shifting this narrative to one that better reflects the complexity of conflict and offers a more empowering and useful role for the storyteller to adopt.

Hardy recommends the tragedy narrative as a more productive story. This narrative offers a more complex plot, uncertainty (things aren't always as they seem), and imperfect characters (there is good and bad in everyone). Unlike the virtuous heroine, the tragic storyteller can recognize that they have options during a conflict and take responsibility for the choices they have made. In doing so, the storyteller gains greater conflict resilience by shifting from dependency on others to self-determination and agency.

In Part 2 of the book, Hardy offers the REAL Conflict Coaching System which provides guidelines that describe six shifts that need to happen to transition from the counter-productive melodramatic narrative to a more productive, conflict resilient tragedy narrative. The acronym REAL stands for pillars that embody a tragedy narrative: reflection, engagement, artistry and learning. Reflection involves careful consideration about how the situation unfolded and options for moving forward. Engagement is about being pro-active and approaching the conflict rather than being passive and conflict avoidant. Artistry is the use of creative thinking when analyzing conflict situations. Learning is acquiring new skills with an eye toward improvement and growth. The REAL system describes six shifts that need to occur when someone is describing a conflict using a melodramatic narrative: (1) simplified-complex, (2) certainty-uncertainty, (3) passive-active, (4) dependency-agency, (5) past-future and (6) suffering-learning. Simplified-complex means that the narrative should shift from a simple plot to a more fully explored understanding of the complexity of the situation. Certainty-uncertainty suggests a shift from predictability to acknowledgement, acceptance and curiosity about facets of a story that give rise to uncertainty. Passive-active reflects a shift from being a passive victim in a situation to realizing one's own self-determination. Dependency-agency describes the shift from being helpless and dependent on others to solve a conflict to the value of taking control of one's own situation. Past-future describes the need to shift from focusing on the past to embracing change and planning for the future. Suffering-learning describes a shift from suffering from a conflict to learning and growing from the conflict. Each shift that is discussed in the book includes specific techniques that an Ombuds can use to help guide the shift in the visitor's narrative.



Finally, Hardy describes the use of the REAL System as supporting visitors by creating greater clarity or mindfulness of the situation, comprehension or understanding of the factors that influenced the situation, an understanding of both past and future choices, and an increased sense of conflict competence in the client and confidence to be able to handle similar situations in the future.

In summary, this book describes the characteristics and qualities of both the unproductive melodramatic narrative and the more productive tragedy narrative. The book offers a system to help shift a visitor's narratives from melodramatic to tragedy. The value of this book for an Ombuds is the identification of elements to listen for in a visitor's story and how to create a thoughtful shift in the visitor's own narrative. Through careful open-ended guided questioning the Ombuds can support a visitor's productive shift from the helpless melodramatic conflict story to the tragedy narrative that embodies greater agency.



## REFERENCES

Hardy, S. (2022). *Conflict Coaching Fundamentals: Working with Conflict Stories*. New York, NY: Routledge.



## AUTHOR BIO

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