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The Connected Salesperson

Restoring the *boulangerie* smile
in the omnichannel era



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Conflict resolution

Why read this chapter?

In Chapter 7 I introduce the notion of conflict resolution, as we have seen that conflict can seriously damage relations and the overall effectiveness of retail organizations, creating toxic emotions which even customers can pick up on. Interpersonal conflict connects to anger and rage from the six basic emotions, also incorporating elements of revenge at times. What's more, when I ask my readers which subject areas they would like me to look at in more detail, conflict resolution is one that has cropped up on quite a few occasions. I have tried to use a number of very practical tools which I hope will help to anticipate and resolve conflict, starting with oneself.

When I began Retail Coaching, I focused on strengthening individual development. However, over time, team challenges and the idea of collective performance have become increasingly important. Of similar significance is the optimization of interaction, not only between store colleagues or between supervisors and stores, but also between head office (logistics, marketing, human resources etc.) and stores. Over the next few pages, I will offer some key points that aim to facilitate this communication.

Unproductive complaints vs. productive complaints

A leader should take care with the way that opinions are communicated, in particular, distinguishing between unproductive and productive complaints. This approach is inspired by the European School of Coaching. Unproductive complaints and gossip can be very damaging to the mood in a store or a retail chain. The adult communication posture, the rational, balanced position to adopt, means encouraging productive complaints. These are the differences between the two:

UNPRODUCTIVE COMPLAINTS	PRODUCTIVE COMPLAINTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aimed at third parties. • Look for support and sympathy. • Are repetitive. • End up as negative personal judgments. • Emotional venting. • Seek revenge. • Resentment and hostility between the groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aimed at the person that made the promise. • Leave room for amends to be made. • Are not characterized by negative emotion or punishment. • The sooner, the better. • Assessment: what did we learn?

When the manager detects or senses a conflict between two people, they offer this filter to ensure a positive solution.

Productive apology (without making excuses)

When a manager-coach gets their teams to work – not seeking perfection, which is impossible, but excellence (a constant goal) – even apologies are possible. A productive apology implies:

- Recognizing commitment.
- Offering an explanation.
- Ascertaining what damage has been done and offering to make amends.
- Negotiating a new commitment.
- The sooner, the better.
- Assessment: what did we learn?

Culturally it seems that, in countries such as Spain, the concept of apologizing is less developed than elsewhere.

How can I rebuild a damaged relationship?

I remember a lovely case involving a colleague-coach, Gabriel, who trained alongside me. Arriving at school that Thursday morning, on our table were a number of class sheets with the day's headline: "Rebuilding a damaged relationship". A number of colleagues considered this certification as professional coach, not only as the training for a new profession, but also as a real process of personal transformation. We were taking it very seriously. We were looking to shed ballast in order to fly higher. We all took our individual questionnaire. So did Gabriel. This is what we wrote:

1. *Write the name of someone with whom you could have had a better relationship:*
Wow. Gabriel is on form and wants to apply this exercise to a case as useful as possible. He wrote on a piece of paper: "My older brother, Daniel."
2. *From 1 to 10, how would you rate this relationship?* "I think I answered 5 or 6."
3. *Describe the situation:* "Daniel is a year older than me and our relationship has always been marked by rivalry. He has a strong personality that perhaps has put me in his shadow. For that reason, I always wanted to get better grades than him at school, a bigger car, better looking girlfriends, earn more money, and so on. It wasn't an open conflict, rather an underlying tension. Of course, our relationship affected the rest of the family. At the dinner table, each of us knew how to hurt the other."
4. *And the other person – what does he say?* "I realize that I don't know how to answer this question. I have no idea what my brother thinks," Gabriel wrote.
5. *Objectively, in his reactions, his acts... what is transmitting the other person?*
This question made Gabriel think long and hard. He realized that when he was asking Daniel for help, for his older brother to give him his support, he would always receive it.
6. *So who does the problem lie with?* "With me," wrote Gabriel.

7. *What can you do about it today?* "Talk to him, have a conversation."
8. *Where, when, how?* "I'm going to take him to dinner, just the two of us, when I go to London in two weeks' time"

Gabriel arranged the dinner in London. While Gabriel frequently stayed in his brother's guest room, it wasn't usual for him to take Daniel out for dinner while staying with his family. So anyway, at 9 pm that Monday evening in June, Gabriel and Daniel sat down to have dinner in a restaurant in London Covent garden area. Gabriel told his brother:

- "Daniel, for 38 years I've seen you as a rival. Today that's all over."
- "Why?" Daniel stared incredulously at him.
- "Because it is. I've decided so. From now on, I want to be the first member of your fan club."

Gabriel explained his thought process, how his awareness had been raised. Daniel was surprised, astonished... and smiling. He was then able to tell his younger brother how his reactions made him uneasy and sometimes irritated him. This conversation lasted ten minutes maybe. When it was over, Gabriel told me they talked about other things such as football. Daniel picked up the check, he was so happy with how the evening had turned out. Today, the brothers support each other mutually and unconditionally. A new path has opened up for the two men. Even at the family dinner table with nephews, grandparents etc, a subject which once would have led to tension and arguments is now smoothed over with just a knowing glance between the two brothers.

I'm sharing this anecdote with you to show how coaches seek to lead by example. We really do believe in these values, we apply them and stake a lot on the outcome. Human relations can be very complex, and yet also very simple, when there is a willingness to grow and do things well.

This questionnaire that Gabriel filled, in just a few minutes, (and I did my own) with its seven successive open questions, was a brutal coaching and awareness-raising exercise. If you like, try applying it to a damaged relationship, either at work or in your personal life. If Gabriel could use it with his brother, you could with your boss, your employee, your partner... with anyone who you're 'tied to' or who is stopping you from flying higher.

To fly freely, first you have to get rid of ballast, what is weighing you down. It's a metaphor that brings to mind a hot-air balloon, and was always at the forefront of my mind in my early days as a coach. Each of us is an uncut

diamond. Sometimes growth is not so much about learning new things as smoothing down the rough edges. Polishing the diamond and allowing it to sparkle with the greatest possible intensity – with your customers, your team, your family. Be a light, a beacon for the retail trade, and the world in general.

How do I initiate a conversation to repair a damaged relationship in one of my stores?

“Life begins at the end of your comfort zone.”

NEALE DONALD WALSCH

If you are a manager who detects a conflict situation in a store and are looking for resolution try the following steps:

1. **Objectivize the situation:** Turn judgments into facts. For example:
 - What is the current emotional climate in the store?
 - On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate the others?
 - Specifically, what’s happened?
2. **Tackle the issue:** To assess its importance, only talk to the interested parties, first individually and then together.
3. **Cost:** What is the cost of this climate to the store’s business?
4. **Listen:** Allow the person to express themselves, observing both their verbal and non-verbal language.
5. **Commitments / punishment:**
 - What exactly are you committed to?
 - OK, so I have to tell you that if not, the consequences will be as follows: ...
6. Check that the situation has been resolved (two days later, by phone):
 - You can bring your normal visit schedule forward, for example phoning after two days or after five, specifically to check if the problem has been resolved.

The adult approach of the person who overcomes the discomfort of starting a conversation to resolve a conflict, will also open an unexpected window onto their path toward growth, progress and development. I am not responsible for the changes to the people around me, but I am responsible for my own actions, initiatives and conversations. Who knows to what extent these changes influence those around me. First I sweep the yard in front of my house, to help make the world a cleaner place.

How do I resolve a conflict between two colleagues?

*“When strong winds blow, most people hide.
A few build windmills and get rich.”*

POPULAR SAYING

Hiding at the first sign of conflict is a sure sign of problems. Building windmills is a way of assertively tackling a situation, putting it on the table and solving the problem. Occasionally, with time, the light bulbs on the ceiling get covered in dirt, dead flies and so on. Coaching is a way of cleaning away what is not needed in order to once again enjoy the original light. Nelson Mandela said it very well: “And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. “Very often this means repairing damaged relationships and resolving conflicts.

- **Conflict resolution between two salespeople:**

A few weeks ago, Maria was angry with Daniela. Maria felt that, during Daniela’s turn at the cash registers, she charged Maria’s sales to her own code number, taking her commission. Paula, the store manager, noticed the situation. What did she do?

- Act sooner rather than later. As soon as she noticed a hint of conflict, she approached the two women, separately at first.
- Remember the rules: The person on the cash register must charge the sale to the code of the salesperson responsible for it.
- First handle the individual, then the team.
- Ensure commitments.

- **Conflict resolution between two area managers:**

Viviane and I will remember the following scene all our lives. A commercial manager in charge of 14 area managers had asked us to professionalize his team and increase the KPI through our Retail Coaching program. After the first phase, we mentioned that we had noticed that there were two separate groups, resulting from the sale of the family-owned chain to a multinational – 20 years ago! In individual coaching we often heard talk of ‘them’, referring to ‘the other group’. In the classroom, we realized that the leaders of the two groups sat as far apart from each other as possible. Imagine the emotional cost involved in keeping two people, two groups apart. At each monthly meeting. With each new initiative.

We asked the manager: “Would you like us to approach this situation within the framework of our mission?”

“Well yes, if you could, although that isn’t the most important.”

The manager added he had got used to the situation and even tolerated it. It is true that in the individual coaching sessions with the two people concerned, Viviane and I suggested and monitored awareness building, but would it be followed by action? In the third phase, the following month, something striking happened. At the diploma ceremony, during the individual testimony, the two ‘leaders’, with tears in their eyes, buried the hatchet, said that they regretted the time they had wasted and promised to start anew, working together toward a common end. At last!

It would seem that, as they had agreed to do with their coach during the individual sessions, they had talked together, alone. It transpired that everything had been resolved over a few beers the night before. They both said what had to be said. Congratulations to both of them for being able to start a conversation which healed their damaged relationship. Evidences today show us that even our health and a sense of self-fulfillment can grow through coaching.

I found out later that the organization as a whole had benefitted greatly from this reconciliation. It had untied the knot that was hindering any collective progress.

These are the challenges facing systemic coaching. Systemic meaning the system: the organization, the team, the family. The system needs all their members to carry out their duties individually, in order to allow the sustainable and harmonious development of the group.

Public identity

*"I tried it out.
Even my wife identified my three strengths."*

CARLOS, store manager

When seeking to anticipate conflict, to look after our emotions, to prepare ourselves for success, it can be helpful to take a snapshot of how others see us. We call this exercise 'public identity'. It is designed to be a qualitative survey, a request for feedback in which the person concerned asks a number of people around him (including at least two employees) to say how they see him in writing, especially:

- What are my three strengths?
- Which three areas could I improve in?

The amalgamation of these mini-surveys often becomes the starting point for a very rewarding coaching session or process. For this reason, it's better to do it with the support of a professional coach.

To sum up:

- In a store or a retail chain in which there is a ruinous atmosphere, dominated by conflict and 'what is left unsaid', any analysis will be productive and bear fruit.
- Knowing how to resolve and even anticipate interpersonal conflict allows us to emotionally prepare our teams for success.
- Conflict management turns 'commerce emotion' from anger to joy.
- A customer experience that scores 10 is totally incompatible with stores and chains that allow conflict situations to fester (I have seen this happen).

