

## Discussion Paper

### Conflict Resolution in Senior Management Teams

Occasionally, mentors encounter instances of conflict. Often unspoken, these conflicts exist between those they are mentoring and the client's peers, team members or superiors.

For various reasons, ranging from fear of confrontation to simply not wanting to be seen as not complying; to 'not fitting in', executives, even senior executives and managers, silently conspire in a 'reign of silence' often without realising it.

In their paper, *Is Silence Killing your Company?* (*Harvard Business Review* May 2003)\* Perlow and Williams argue that: '...in organisations ranging from small businesses to *Fortune* 500 corporations.....silence can exact a high psychological price on individuals, generating feelings of humiliation, pernicious anger, resentment and the like that, if unexpressed, contaminate every interaction, shut down creativity and undermine productivity'.

This so-called *Spiral of Silence* can emanate from the top-down or from the bottom-up. Highly intelligent and well-intended senior people may be reluctant to see in their own behaviour a rejection of suggestions they find uncomfortable coming from their subordinates. Whereas those very subordinates may feel that they are jeopardising their career progression if they speak up and are seen to 'rock the boat'.

Clearly, an environment needs to be created in which those in conflict can safely address the issues, be assured of confidentiality and with the further assurance of an independent facilitator, expose the issues and discover resolutions that all the parties can work with.

In most cases – certainly in those at senior levels, this function cannot be adequately or appropriately undertaken within the HR function because there is generally a reporting relationship or perhaps a conflict of interest as they may be part of the matter and one of the parties in conflict.

How perhaps to best to deal with these issues? Creating a '*Virtuous Circle*'

**Mentor-pro** offer executive business-mentors who are accredited mediators trained in conflict resolution within the sphere of the executive suite and the direct reporting lines into the top-team environment. Singularly or often in co-mediation, these mediators explore the issues between individuals and teams. In confidential discussions, they work with the teams to find solutions to the issues that they can all live with. Within this framework, provision is made for one-on-one confidential discussions between the mediator and the individuals who have issues. The mediator seeks to help each individual identify options for dealing with the issue directly should it or others arise in the future.

In this way, the *Spiral of Silence* is replaced by a *Virtuous Circle*, with immediate beneficial effect on the team and on the business. As the participants become used to talking to each other about difficult issues within a *learned framework*, the leadership team can address future issues and prevent them becoming impediments to progress.

#### **Mentor-pro** Mediators:

- [Anna Booth](#) – Advanced Mediation, Dept. of Law, Bond University
- [Michael Donovan](#) – Accredited and Member Institute of Arbitrators and Mediators, Australia
- [David Lawrance](#) – Accredited and Member Institute of Arbitrators and Mediators, Australia
- [David Stephens](#) – LEADR trained and Member of Leading Edge Alternate Dispute Resolution

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\*Leslie Perlow (Associate Professor of Organisational Development Harvard Business School) and Stephanie Williams (Research Associate, Harvard Business School)



# mediatorprofile

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## MICHAEL DONOVAN



*'We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.'*  
Anais Nin

**Michael Donovan** now leads a group of former CEO's and senior executives as independent business-mentors and mediators to corporate leaders and emerging talent. He is the former Regional VP Asia-Pacific and Mentor Faculty Head for global executive business mentoring firm Merryck & Co. A number of his colleagues are trained mediators like Michael. You have access to this group through Michael for co-mediations.

He was previously the CEO of the large Best Western Motel and Hotel Group in Australia. Michael has a solid 30 years of domestic and international business experience with emphasis on strategic planning, logistics, organisational & change management. He has worked domestically and internationally in and consulted to a wide range of SME, ASX200, NFP, governments, public transport, the environment, tourism, the arts and entertainment sectors. Michael has a strong technology background.

He is one of the first executives in Australia to undertake certification in Executive Impact<sup>SM</sup> a new communication methodology that applies to persuading, negotiating and influencing business leaders. The art of persuasion as a component of the 'trusted-adviser role' in business is now more critical than ever across professional services and relationship-based business. As an accredited mediator, Michael is well aware that influencing and persuading is essential to the delivery of long-term sustainable mediated agreements.

In addition to his mediation expertise, Michael has developed an excellent reputation as a strategic facilitator, board room speaker and presenter. He uses his considerable international business background to assist clients find what is the best solution for their needs. Michael is also accredited in the GENOS<sup>TM</sup> Emotional Intelligence tool.

Michael is a *Fellow, Australian Institute of Management, Fellow, Australian Institute of Company Directors (Dip. OM); a Graduate in Innovation and Entrepreneurship; holds Certification in Environmental Business Management* from the George Washington University, Washington DC. and is a national winner of an AFR/Telstra Technology Award and a NSW Productivity Award.

He is a Member of the Institute of Australian Arbitrators and Mediators.

Represented by **iMentor-pro**

Mob +61 (0)407 600 939

[michael@michael-donovan.com](mailto:michael@michael-donovan.com)

[www.michael-donovan.com](http://www.michael-donovan.com)

