



COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND EMPATHY

HANDLING COMMON CONFLICT SITUATIONS

Even with the best of intentions, humans can never fully avoid conflict. In general, these conflicts usually have less to do with factors such as religion, nationality, cultural differences, political ideology, etc. than they have with the universal human predisposition to conflict. There is no single right way of handling conflicts. Peacemakers (who can be anyone and everyone!) have to learn, and teach, many different alternatives to unchecked conflict and to violence

WHAT THE EXERCISE IS ABOUT

- Time: the whole class
- The students consider various conflict situations that can arise in dealing with others.
- Working in small groups, the students discuss the basic needs involved in these conflicts. Based on this discussion, each group develops a conflict situation to act out.

THE GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

For this exercise it's a good idea for the conflicts discussed to be everyday ones that are familiar to the students. Each student chooses a method of solving disputes that is atypical for him or her. The goal is for students to expand their experience of different conflict resolution roles and methods.

For instance, if a particular student is more accustomed to being the peacemaker (mediator) in everyday arguments, he or she should take the role of an opponent, and so on. The aim of the exercise is to help the students to learn, through a short, controlled enactment of a conflict, to feel what it's like and what it can result from.

HOW THE EXERCISE SHOULD PROCEED

Put a large sheet of paper on the wall or board. Write up the common conflict situations that the students suggest. These can occur anywhere – at school, home, wherever. Some examples:

- Different personalities
- Language barriers
- Age differences
- Different temperaments or energy levels
- Differences of opinion

- Practical difficulties

Put up another large sheet of paper with the heading “Different ways of handling common conflict situations.” Have a quick brainstorming session on this theme. Some possible suggestions:

- One party gives in to the other in order to avoid continued hostility or violence
- All / both the parties discuss the situation together and aim for a solution that is mutually acceptable to all / both
- The parties discuss the matter and reach a compromise
- Someone who is not part of the conflict offers to mediate – to help the conflicting parties to discuss the situation constructively and to arrive at a mutually acceptable resolution
- All / both conflicting parties agree to allow an outside party to decide the matter

If one side is clearly in the wrong:

- He or she apologizes to the other, who then forgives him or her.
- He or she pays for the damage and remedies the situation.
- Both sides work together to remedy the situation.

Divide the class into groups of 3 or 4. Ask each group to prepare a short presentation on some conflict situation, and to use one of the aforementioned three ways of resolving it. About 15 minutes should be enough for part of the exercise.

When the whole class is ready, ask each group to present their conflict situation to the rest of the class, the “audience”. The task of the audience is to give constructive feedback on the group’s chosen method of solving the conflict. Based on this feedback, the whole class should try to improve on the solution. About 15 minutes per group should be enough for this part of the exercise.

FOR DISCUSSION AT THE END OF THE EXERCISE

After all the groups have presented, the class should discuss together the relative merits of each solution that was proposed to each particular conflict. Encourage the students to justify their opinions, and to try to connect the insights they’ve gained in the exercise to specific real-world conflicts. The following, broad questions are also very helpful in creating lively class discussion:

- Ask the students to respond to this statement: “Nothing is agreed upon until everything is agreed upon.” Ask them to justify their response, and to give practical examples of what could happen in both cases, which would be the better option; and so on.
- What kinds of things make a negotiated solution more likely to last? (One important condition for a negotiated peace being more likely to endure is that all those affected by a conflict are given an equal voice in negotiating a



solution – rather than only men, or only elites, etc. In addition to this condition – maximum inclusiveness – another important general requirement for lasting peace is to ensure early on that all parties to the conflict are genuinely committed to finding a fair and mutually acceptable solution; and so on).

This exercise was developed by Joy Pople and Akiko Ikeno.