



COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND EMPATHY - PARTICIPATION AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE

HIDDEN INTERESTS

Given the necessary time and resources, any problem or conflict can be solved if all those concerned are genuinely committed to solving it. This requires that all sides are as honest as possible, and that they are able to express their aims openly. Mutual trust often takes time to build, and is based on good mutual experiences. This requires trust between all sides. The greater the number of affected parties that are included in the negotiation process from the very beginning, the more likely it is that a solution or solutions eventually be found that everyone concerned can accept.

WHAT THE EXERCISE IS ABOUT

- Time: about 15 minutes, with time for discussion at the end
- Divide the class into groups and give each group the task of building the building described
- Each student is also given another goal, which he or she has to keep secret from the other. As in all conflict resolution efforts, the presence of unstated or even secret goals can create severe problems for cooperation towards a common goal.


THE GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

This simulation helps students to appreciate how important it is for all sides to work together – and how harmful it is if there are interests at work that are being kept hidden from one or other party. These unstated influences almost always lead to contradictions and conflicts. The simulation helps students develop the self-confidence, problem-solving and persuasion skills needed in constructively resolving conflicts.

HOW THE EXERCISE SHOULD PROCEED

For this exercise, you'll need a large supply of coloured Lego bricks or some other similar building material. Whatever the material, make sure that there are several colours available, because this is the basis of the "hidden agendas" suggested below.

You will also need one card for each student in the class – one card for each secret task. Divide the class into groups of 4 students at most. Explain to all the groups that their common goal is to build a wall using the blocks provided. Write up the general instructions for all to see. For instance: "Build a wall that's 6 rows high and 2 blocks deep, and with a window in it."



Then give a random “secret card” to each student. Each card gives a task that must be achieved while being kept secret from the rest of the group. As the group works together on the common goal, each student must make sure that his or her hidden agenda is achieved in the final result.

Below are some examples of instructions that could be used as hidden agendas. If necessary, customize these to suit the class and the building materials available.

- Make sure that 4 white pieces are in contact in the horizontal direction
- Make sure that each row has 3 blue pieces
- Make sure that there are no black pieces in the first or last rows
- Make sure that each wall contains red pieces in an unbroken column from top to bottom
- Make sure that no row contains more than 3 different colours
- Make sure that no blue and red pieces are touching
- Make sure that every second row contains a white piece
- ... and so on.

It is inevitable that these “hidden agendas” will create conflicts in just about every group. The students will also notice that the stated common task – getting the house built – will take a lot longer than it would if everyone was being honest and open. And overall the whole process is likely to be very frustrating for all concerned.

FOR DISCUSSION AT THE END OF THE EXERCISE

After about 15 minutes, the teacher can bring the building efforts to an end, and with the whole class raise the following questions:

- What group, if any, succeeded in their common goal?
- What students, if any, succeeded in achieving his or her hidden agenda?
- What kinds of problems did the groups have?
- Did conflicts arise? Describe these.
- If conflicts did arise, were you able to solve them by compromising and being flexible?
- Did any participants start to feel paranoid – that is, did they (feel the urge to) reject some proposal from another person because they suspected there might be a hidden agenda behind it?
- Were the students able to establish and maintain trust in each other?
- What was the general effect of the presence of hidden agendas on achievement of the common goal? And more importantly, what was the general effect of hidden agendas on group morale?
- What did each student consider the most important lesson of the exercise?

The exercise could also be done by making the groups compete with each other. This increases the pressure, which is likely to highlight the disruptive effects of hidden agendas even more.