



COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND EMPATHY – NEGOTIATION SKILLS – PARTICIPATION AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE

ORANGE PICKLE

Conflicts and disputes can be solved in several different ways. However, finding a solution that suits all sides can take a long time. Everyone must be heard – all involved in the conflict must be allowed to share their thoughts and feelings with all the others. As the parties learn to trust each other more and more, the risk of violence drops accordingly. And the more clearly the real objectives of each side are on display for all to see, the more scope there is for forging new types of solutions.

WHAT THIS EXERCISE IS ABOUT

- Time: about 15 minutes, plus time for discussion at the end
- The students have to suggest possible outcomes for an imaginary conflict situation.
- Depending on the amount of creativity involved, outcomes to conflict resolution can be divided roughly into five categories. The sort of outcome involving the most creativity is a win-win situation: the parties find or create some solution that leaves them all better off than there could otherwise be.

THE AIMS OF THE EXERCISE

The roots of many conflicts can be found in mutually incompatible goals. In the conflict of this simulation, both sides want (presumably the whole of) the same thing. Sometimes these incompatible goals are easy to spot, but more often they are not so evident on the surface, harder to articulate. Some goals can be justified. Others might be less so, or even immoral or illegal.

A conflict situation (assuming for simplicity only two parties) usually leads to one of five types of outcome (see the numbered list below).

The greater the variety of possible solutions we can find for a given dispute, the more likely it is that all the sides will be able to solve it peacefully and fairly. Simply put, creativity – finding and developing ideas that are beyond the reach of the habitual and the commonplace – is the key to conflict resolution. As recognized by Albert Einstein – who was also a noted pacifist – the kind of thinking that created a problem is not the same thinking that is likely to solve it. Or as the jazz trumpeter Miles Davis put it to his band members: “Don’t play what’s there, play what’s not there.” In other words, try to go beyond the obvious towards something new.



HOW THE EXERCISE SHOULD PROCEED

Divide the class into pairs, and give each pair one orange. Instruct the pairs that they are arguing over possession of the orange, and they have to come up with as many ways as possible to resolve the conflict.

The teacher shouldn't give any more instructions than this, although some students are likely to ask! If you want, the orange can be placed on the table at an equal distance from both students in each pair. Give the class about 15 minutes to propose solutions and write them down.

THINGS TO CONSIDER AT THE END OF THE SIMULATION

Get the pairs to read out their suggestions, and to assign each a number from the following list of five possible types of outcome:

1. X wins and Y loses
2. X loses and Y wins
3. X and Y resolve the conflict by both compromising
4. X and Y both withdraw from the conflict, or both lose
5. X and Y work together to find a win-win situation. This is what we mean in this simulation by the parties "rising above" the conflict. The goal of conflict resolution is to establish, as soon as possible, a situation in which both sides benefit.

Things to discuss at the end of the exercise:

- How did it feel to be part of a conflict? Was there continually good communication within the pairs? If there was a change, did the communication improve or worsen as the simulation progressed? It's important to identify and acknowledge the emotions we feel in a conflict situation – do we become stressed, competitive, even angry? Does one or other party begin to withdraw, or does the cooperation continue? What's most effective is to seek out solutions together. This does not however necessarily prevent each person from having his or own particular style of conflict resolution. And with time and effort we can all learn new and more constructive ways to work with others.
- In what spirit did the two parties in each pair communicate – did they ask questions, or make offers, or make demands? Did one or other party (or both) try to understand the other's aim?

One of the most crucial skills a mediator can have (and develop) is the ability to ask good questions. Equally, for any party to a conflict questions are essential to getting a better understanding of the other parties. If we don't know that the other party thinks or feels about the situation – and don't take the trouble to find out – we cannot hope to reach a mutually satisfactory compromise. And this leaves even less hope of developing a win-win solution.



So questioning is vital, and should be aimed at clarifying two things. The first is the other party's position – what he or she claims to want – and the second is his or her actual goal. There is an important difference between the two. Negotiating about the various actual goals at play in a conflict is more specific and more concrete. This approach is therefore more likely to bring progress in the discussions than is possible if negotiations do not get past the level of stated positions.

For example, if both students in each pair claim simply to “want” the orange, the situation looks like an unsolvable clash between two diametrically opposing positions. To get past this, questions need to be asked, by both parties, of each other: what is it that the other really wants? What is his or her actual goal? It could be that one party only wants the orange for its seeds to plant, whereas the other wants to eat it. Or both parties might settle for eating half an orange. Or one party might just want the rind to put in a dessert; and so on. In this way the two party's aims are not mutually exclusive. Or perhaps one side wants to juggle the orange, and the other wants to draw a face or write on it. As long as the parties can agree to pursue them simultaneously, these goals need not be mutually exclusive. The point is that with questioning in good faith, it is possible to figure out what room for manoeuvre, and of what kind, there is in the situation. In short, moving from stated, black-and-white positions to real aims can enable great progress to be made in conflict resolution, if only all parties are willing to learn more about each other.

This simulation was developed by Joy Pople and Akiko Ikeno.

