



COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND EMPATHY –
PARTICIPATION AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE

RECOGNIZING BASIC HUMAN NEEDS AND CONCERNS

It's easier to understand why people behave as they do if we understand the basic needs and concerns that influence our own behaviour. This is true at every level of human interaction – in personal, group, and international relations. Having acknowledged our own basic concerns allows each person to more consciously choose those sorts of actions and reactions that lead to constructive relationships and to constructive conflict prevention and resolution. It's also worth remembering that the solution to any conflict need not be perfect, nor is perfection likely to be a sensible aim in just about any situation. What is most important is that the solution is arrived at multilaterally and fairly, so that all sides can freely accept it and remain committed to it.


WHAT THE EXERCISE IS ABOUT

- This exercise will take up the whole class time
- Very different conflicts are often based on surprisingly similar concerns, such as those relating to economic wellbeing and the need to belong to some collective or other.
- The exercise involves discussing the different basic concern involved in different conflict situations. They then use these to create a roleplay.

THE GOAL OF THE EXERCISE

Each person has basic physical needs that are essential to our survival and wellbeing. Some global conflicts are caused by one or more of these basic needs being denied to some group. And even when basic physical needs are met, that is not enough for wellbeing, because there is also a wide range of basic and universal human concerns. The aim of this exercise is for the class to identify these basic, universal human needs and concerns. The first step in dealing constructively with any conflict, and indeed in preventing any conflict, is to identify these needs and concerns and to make sure that they are met for everyone involved in the conflict.

However, this is often made difficult because these needs and concerns are often not evident on the surface. Another complicating factor is that everyone has competing goals and interests. It is helpful to realize though that these diverse aims and interests often revolve around the same concerns and needs. All these realizations are essential to fair and effective conflict resolution, at all levels.



The teacher begins the exercise by asking the students to suggest the basic needs that are vital to human survival. These should be written up for all to see. Some of the most obvious examples are food, water, physical protection and shelter from the elements, and health. After a good few have been listed, the class can move on to consider the basic universal human concerns that animate people once the basic physical needs are met. Some of the more obvious examples include physical security, economic security, a sense of belonging, recognition, acknowledgement and acceptance by others, control over one's own life, and so on.

Recognizing basic, universal human needs often requires a lot of careful listening to others. The teacher should tell the students that to be able to uncover another person's (or collective's) unstated concerns, it's very helpful to ask probing questions of the form "Why", "Why not", and "What if" These questions can concern the past, present or future.

HOW THE EXERCISE SHOULD PROCEED

In advance of the exercise the teacher should prepare cards showing a number of situations that could lead to conflict. It's most convenient for the purpose of this exercise if these scenarios are of the sort that the students can readily identify with. Divide the class into groups of three or four, and give one card to each group. Some examples:

- A mother and daughter disagree on what time the daughter should be home in the evenings.
- Two neighbours disagree on which side of the line between their properties an apple tree is growing.
- A student and teacher disagree on the grade the student should receive.
- Two groups disagree on whether religious symbols can be displayed in public (for example burkas, crosses)

The students have to identify and examine the basic concerns of each side in the conflict. In doing this, the students should be encouraged to use the sorts of probing questions referred to earlier.

Then ask each group to come up with a roleplay or a short play about how recognizing and providing for basic universal human concerns can help in solving the conflict. In other words, the roleplay or play should highlight the basic concerns that influence the thoughts and behaviour of each character.

It is not a problem if this exercise at first feels uncomfortable or forced – and it's not even a problem if the students do not manage to fully solve the conflict. Progress towards a mutually acceptable solution is often a less-intimidating goal than aiming for a complete solution all in one go. With that in mind, this exercise should be considered a success if the students manage to raise even just one or two basic human concerns. If they can do this, then it will very likely be useful to them in their own lives and relationships.



QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION AT THE END OF THE EXERCISE

At the end of the exercise, each group can discuss the following questions:

- What basic universal human concerns did the exercise bring up?
- How much and in what way did recognizing these concerns help in solving the conflict, or at least in making progress towards solving it?
- How might these realizations be applicable to broader conflicts that are going on in the world?

Adapted by Joy Pople and Akiko Ikeno