



PARTICIPATION AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE – NEGOTIATION SKILLS

ARM-WRESTLING

Often in conflicts, it can become hard to look at the situation more broadly or to think much further than the present. One common problem is intense focus on one's own interest. This can make it very difficult to consider the common good rather than the benefit to be gained for ourselves or our group. How might the fear of losing be lessened so that the parties can together explore possibilities for an outcome that's acceptable to all?

WHAT THE EXERCISE IS ABOUT

- Time: 5-10 minutes, plus time for discussion
- In pairs, the students take up an arm-wrestling position. The pairs are promised a point (or some other reward) for each time the back of a hand touches the table top.
- Rather than resisting each other, the fastest and easiest way to collect points is through cooperation

THE GOALS OF THE EXERCISE


This quick exercise is very effective for highlighting the very human tendencies:

- to assume that every human interaction is a zero-sum game (that is, that the only possible outcomes are winning or losing);
- to consider the other parties to an argument or conflict as our opponents;
- to allow communications with the other(s) involved in the conflict to worsen, or even to break down altogether;
- to limit our own possibilities and abilities for negotiating a solution that's acceptable to all concerned

HOW THE EXERCISE SHOULD PROCEED

To start with, the teacher should avoid describing the conflict situation as an arm-wrestle. Ask the whole class to form pairs, and then demonstrate (with the help of a volunteer) the position to take: the pair grasp each other by the hand, elbows on the table. Point out that this is a very simple exercise – there are only two rules to remember:

1. One point is awarded for the back of one person's hand touching the table top.
2. The goal of each player is to win as many points as possible for him- or herself, regardless of the other players.



Tell them that each point is worth e.g. one sweet / candy. The players have only 10 seconds to earn as many points as possible.

THINGS TO DISCUSS AT THE END OF THE EXERCISE

Count the points roughly by a show of hands: how many pairs got 0 points, how many 1-5, 6-20, over 20?

Analyzing behaviour: demonstrate the most efficient strategies for collecting points (without breaking the rules). The pair could sway their arms left to right, or perhaps they could have agreed that one “wins” continually and then they split the points.

Identifying reasons for success: ask the pairs that got the most points what might explain their success. Why did they do so well? Did they cooperate, and if so how – what did they say to each other? Or was one student just overwhelmingly stronger than the other, or what?

Identifying limiting assumptions: ask the pairs that got the least points what might have been holding them back. It is highly likely that they carried out the exercise under one or more of the following assumptions:

- We have seen and done this game before.
- We know how this game is played.
- We assumed that we weren’t allowed to talk to each other.
- We assumed that we had to keep our arms in contact the whole time.
- We didn’t trust each other.
- We assumed that the rules were set in advance.