



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

CONFLICT RESOLUTION WITH A MEDIATOR

In any dispute it's important to understand what caused, or might have caused, the conflict. But at the same time everyone involved in the conflict (including the mediator) must understand and keep in mind that all conflicts can be solved. This is true even if some of the harm caused by the conflict – hurt feelings, violence, destruction and even death – cannot be undone. Life must still go on, and for this to be possible for all involved the conflict must be brought to an end in a way that is fair to everyone. This might well involve compromise by one or more sides, or by everybody.

In this light, conflict resolution should be seen as a process in which someone – an outsider who has no personal stake in any side of the conflict – helps all the conflicting sides to better understand each other's views. The mediator's only interest is in getting everyone to reach an agreement that everyone can accept. In this way, the peace that is agreed on is most likely to last.


WHAT THIS ROLEPLAY IS ABOUT

- Time: about 20-35 minutes, with additional time for a closing discussion
- The class will discuss the causes of various conflicts and learn about the mediator's role
- The conflict used in this roleplay can be suggested by the class. One student is chosen (perhaps at random) as the mediator.

THE GOALS OF THE ROLEPLAY

Through conscious practice, everyone can learn to solve conflicts – and everybody should, since conflicts are an inescapable part of human life. Many of the exercises included in the Ahtisaari Days learning materials involve getting students to act or behave in way that can at first feel unnatural, even weird. For instance, it is not often in real life that a single person (in this roleplay, a single student) could solve a conflict on his or her own. But by learning how to mediate in the simplified situation involved in this roleplay, each student is better equipped to act as a mediator (perhaps along with other mediators) in his or her own real-life interactions.

For the peace negotiations to make progress, the mediator must remain open-minded and imaginative. Very often the opposing sides will have a stereotyped view of one another. Because of this, the mediator may have to work hard to get each person involved in the negotiation to see the others as they really are, instead of seeing them as stereotypes or cari-



catures. For peace to be possible, it is essential for all sides to see the humanity in others, including in their worst enemies. Only then can all those involved begin to reach a solution they can all live with.

The fundamental idea behind conflict resolution is that it helps the opposing sides to discuss their problems together, constructively and peacefully. The goal of the mediator is to help all those involved in the negotiations to communicate with each other in such a way that they avoid misunderstandings and new conflicts. Solving a complicated conflict in a peaceful and just way usually demands long-running negotiations. Conflict resolution is very often difficult, but never impossible.

HOW THE ROLEPLAY SHOULD PROCEED

The teacher should give the class 15 minutes or so to think of a conflict to be used in the roleplay. They should discuss it together and make notes. The chosen conflict could be one can be something from their own lives, or any other conflict. It could be an ongoing conflict, or one that's already successfully solved – it doesn't matter. It could even be imaginary. Once they've come up with a conflict, the next step is to develop the idea and create the necessary details about it that will be used in the simulation.

A big part of this step involves deciding who the parties to the conflict are – that is, what are all the opposing sides that make up the conflict? They will also have to identify the representative of each side (or make up a representative for each side). **For simplicity, in this roleplay there will be only two opposing sides in the conflict.** (In real-life peace negotiations there could be many sides, all of which need to be represented at the negotiations if the peace agreement is to be truly successful and lasting). An important part of building lasting peace is ensuring that both the sexes are meaningfully included in the discussions and in any solutions that are arrived at. So it is important that one of the negotiators is represented by a male student, and the other by a female student.

This preparatory part of the roleplay could also be assigned as a homework exercise.

To begin the simulation, the teacher asks one student to act as **the mediator**. The first task of the mediator is to outline (orally) the conflict for the rest of the class. This person then chooses one male and one female student to act as the two participants – **the negotiators** – in the discussion. The roles could be, for example, a mother or father, a teen, a teacher, school principle, a representative of a particular group (e.g. a tribe or political party, even an armed group), a representative of a refugee camp, a local or national politician, a representative of an environmental protection or animal rights group, a tourist, a refugee, or whatever.

The teacher should give the mediator the following guidelines, which are also essential for real-life mediators to know well and follow carefully. **If these rules of mediation are not followed, whatever agreements are reached in the negotiations are unlikely to last.**




Things for the mediator to remember

- Concentrate on the situation being discussed, not on the speaker.
- Try to be empathetic – to put yourself in the place of the people involved in the conflict. Remember that each of them may have more than one aim for the negotiation.
- Let each person involved in the negotiation express his or her feelings and opinions on the matter under discussion. Listen carefully.
- Try to understand each person involved in the negotiation. As he or she speaks, try to identify what the most important points he or she makes.
- Wherever possible, try to avoid making general statements. Instead, concentrate on asking questions that get to the heart of the matter under discussion.
- Make sure that all the persons involved in the negotiation clearly understand what you are saying.
- Don't get too hung up on details.
- Try to propose some solution that all those involved in the discussion can be satisfied with, at least partly.
- Never make threats!
- Being a mediator can be very difficult, but don't let the pressure get to you.
- Where possible, try to make a surprising suggestion. But remember that any such suggestion must be one that all those involved in the discussion will be likely to see as positive.
- For most real-world conflicts, there are no easy, one-step solutions. The more complicated the problem, the greater the number of steps that are likely to be involved in any workable and fair solution.
- It's important that you don't let a new conflict emerge ... or even cause it to happen yourself! The best way to avoid any escalation is to work at getting the opposing sides to cooperate constructively during the negotiations.
- There may be some problems related to the conflict that can't be solved in the present discussion. So try to get all the sides to agree to some plan or at least a schedule for getting back to these matters later.

Throughout the roleplay, the student who's playing the mediator should try his or her best to stick to these guidelines. The same list should be given to the rest of the class as well – these are principles that every student should learn. The other students need not be passive. If the negotiator is not following some (or several) of the guidelines, someone else can point this out, constructively. The teacher should then interrupt the roleplay to correct this before proceeding.

The teacher should begin the roleplay by telling the class that the negotiation will last 20 minutes at most. It's fine if it's shorter, as long as all involved have made a reasonable effort. Also, before beginning it's a good idea to remind the negotiators and the mediator that during the negotiation not everything needs to be solved. It's fine for them to set some matters aside. But the negotiators must agree, with the aid of the mediator, on what matters to discuss in this meeting, and what ones they should leave for a later time.



Before beginning, the teacher should also inform the rest of the class that their task during the next 20 minutes or so is to follow the negotiation and to make notes of points that they'd like to bring up in the class discussion at the end.

The teacher should interrupt the roleplay immediately if any of the students involved become disrespectful, hostile, abusive or upset.

The purpose of the roleplay is to help the students develop an understanding of the essential principles of good mediation. These same principles are also applicable to arguments and conflicts that each student will encounter and be part of in his or her own life. If the students don't manage to complete the negotiation in the 20 minutes, that doesn't matter. What matters most is that the simulation stimulates ideas, feelings and constructive discussion. Also, by doing the roleplay the students will gain some personal experience of the essential principles for mediators given in the list.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AFTER THE ROLEPLAY

The teacher should first ask these questions of those students who had the roles of mediator and the negotiators. Then the same questions should be asked of the rest of the class?

- What happened in the situation?
- What was the atmosphere of the negotiations like – was it friendly, or hostile, or neutral?
- How did it feel to be in the various roles?
- Did the mediator do well in helping the negotiators develop more sympathetic understandings of each other during the negotiations?
- One negotiator was female, the other male – did this have some effect on the negotiation? If so, what effect exactly?
- If one of the students who had the role of negotiator was playing the role of a child, how did this affect the negotiation?
- What did you learn from the roleplay?