



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

JUST LISTEN

In solving arguments and conflicts – that is, in presenting possible solutions – it's important that each person is respected. Each person must be allowed to speak, and must be listened to. The art of listening is not as simple as you might think. It is a skill, and like all skills it gets better with practice. Very few people, if any, are perfect listeners. There is always something going on in one's mind when another person is talking.

WHAT THE EXERCISE IS ABOUT

- Time: about 10-15 minutes per round
- Divide the class into groups, and within each group assign the roles of speakers and listeners
- Each speaker gets to talk without interruptions. While he or she is talking, the rest of the class should take notes. Once the person has finished, the next speaker in the group takes his or her turn.


THE GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

This listening exercise gets students to practice different ways of listening and of being heard. At the same time, they get a better sense of how to speak in a way that gets others to listen (without shouting, of course!)

Although it's tempting to think that different people hear or see the same thing in the same way, this is rarely true. The exercise makes it clear that each person's experience of a particular situation is in some way fairly unique to him or her. Realizing this makes it easier to know what's involved in being a good listener. Because listening is one half of communicating, without being a good listener it's impossible to be a good communicator. And good communication is essential to preventing and solving conflicts.

There are many separate skills involved in being a good listener. These skills include adopting certain types of body language (such as making eye contact, nodding) and avoiding others (looking away while a person is talking, crossing your arms in a defensive pose, yawning, and so on). Students should learn from the exercise that what goes on in the listener's mind – and what does not go on there – while someone's talking to them is very important.

By making these observations for themselves, students are better able to develop a deeper understanding of their own listening habits and preconceptions. A person's preconceptions about the speaker or about what he or she might be about to say have a major effect on the quality of one's listening. So the first step towards becoming a better listener is to



become aware of one's own shortcomings as a listener. By this process each student can learn to become better listeners, and better communicators.

HOW THE EXERCISE PROCEEDS

The teacher begins by asking the students to form groups of three, or four if this is more convenient.

First ask the students to come up with a topic to talk about – something that'll give them enough to say for three minutes. The best topics are ones that those in each group have a personal interest in. And for this exercise positive topics are preferable to negative ones. For instance, the speaker could talk about his or her family, or a hobby, or whatever.

The teacher should ensure that the speaking and listening should be kept within each group. This makes it easier for each speaker to speak freely, since sharing one's thoughts with a small group is usually easier than sharing them with the whole class. Also, remind them that whatever is said within each group should remain within the group. (Confidentiality and trust are essential to conflict resolution).

If there are three person in each group, assign the following roles: A – speaker; B – the listener for facts; C – the listener for feelings. If there are four students in a group, then add a fourth role: D – the neutral observer. In later rounds the students will get to switch roles, so it shouldn't matter who gets which role in the first round.

Once the roles are assigned, give the groups the following information:

- In each group, A is to be allowed to speak without interruption for three minutes.
- B listens for facts that A mentions.
- C listens for the feelings that A expresses as he or she speaks.
- If there is a fourth group member, D, he or she just observes the other three members quietly.

It's important that only A speaks, even if he or she runs of things to say before the three minutes are up. If that happens, it's not a problem! Even sitting quietly together in a small group can be an interesting experience, especially in this exercise.

Once A's three minutes are up, B has two minutes to tell the other group members his or her summary of the facts of A's talk. Then C gets two minutes to do the same for his or her summary of the feelings A expressed.

Person D, if present, should just make a quick note of any observations that he or she would like to bring up in some later discussion about the whole exercise. (This discussion could be done the following school day, for example).

Once the first round is completed, the roles are switched within each group and the next round begins, and so on until each person has got to play each of the three (or four) roles.



FOR DISCUSSION AFTER THE EXERCISE


It's important to follow the exercise with a discussion of the experiences of speaking, listening for facts, listening for emotions, and (for four-person groups) silent observation.

- What was it like to be the speaker?
- What was it like to be the listener for facts?
- What was it like to be the listener for emotions?
- If the speaker was unable to talk about the chosen topic for the full three minutes, how did that make him or her feel?
- If the speaker was silent for a moment (or ran out of things to say before the three minutes were up), how did that make the other group members feel?
- In his or her own opinion, did the listener for emotions do a good job of analyzing the speaker's body language and tone of voice for signs of emotion?
- Which was easier – listening for facts or listening for emotions? Why?
- After listening for three minutes, has your opinion of the chose topic changed in some way? If so, in what way? If not, then why not?
- There are different ways of listening – did the listeners take notes while the speaker was talking, or did they just rely on their memory?
- If one or other of the listeners was taking notes while the speaker was talking, how did that make the speaker feel?
- The observations that the students make during the course of this exercise are likely to include the following:
- Speaking without interruptions for even three minutes is surprisingly difficult.
- We can only really know how another person feels when he or she actually tells us. Pre-formed ideas (preconceptions), body language, our judgements of the speaker's emotions, etc. are only rough guides. The speaker's own account of he or she feels is the most trustworthy source.

From the exercise the students might be able to see that very often when we speak, we are speaking for some other person or people. That is, we behave as if we know how he, she, or they are thinking and feeling – without asking them. It is because we all do this so often that misunderstandings and hurt feelings are so common.

This is important to be aware of in all communication. But it is especially important for peace mediators to remember. Being able to listen well reduces the risk of the listener unconsciously not allowing others to have control of their own feelings, opinions and knowledge about some specific matter. Genuine listening involves not allowing our own ideas to mislead us about what the speaker is actually saying.

Another thing worth pointing out about this exercise, and which the students are likely to have noticed, is that being allowed to speak uninterrupted for three minutes feels strange. This is largely because in most real-life situations people have to compete to be heard. For others the experience of uninterrupted speaking can be uncomfortable because it feels like the others are not part of the conversation – there is no back-and-forth, only a monologue. This exercise is of course artificial in the sense that in real life it is rare to be able to speak for long without being interrupted. But it might be good for all of us to learn how to interrupt less and listen more attentively.



Sometimes a speaker can be bothered by others making notes while he or she is speaking. For one thing, it means there is no eye contact being made. Others feel that having someone make notes while they speak means that they're being taken seriously, and made to feel important. And for others, somebody taking notes while they speak might make them feel uncomfortable, as if they are being interrogated or that their exact words will be used against them later. And so on. So the reaction to note-taking can vary a lot.

This exercise can be developed and modified to fit a particular school subject, e.g. history, geography or ethics. In these cases, it may be the teacher who assigns the topic for the speakers.