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15.277 Special Seminar in Communications: Leadership and Personal Effectiveness Coaching  
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## Faculty Guide: Managing Conflict

### Activity Overview

1. There are at least three reasons why we fail to reach agreement when there are real differences.
  1. Feelings are charged.
  2. Our identity is challenged.
  3. The problem is more complex than either of us knows.  
Source: *Difficult Conversations* by Stone, Patton, Heen.

Here is a visual chart that illustrates where these differences get created. You can see from the “Ladder of Inference” that we overlay our perceptions (or misperceptions) with interpretation and assume we know the truth.

Diagram of the Ladder of Inference removed due to copyright restrictions.

Today’s exercise will address communication problems of dealing with conflict in decision making—within a group, or among individuals. By fruitfully structuring the

beginning *process of managing conflict*, and learning how to understand another’s perspective, you will gain these strengths:

Typical Activity Outcomes	Potential “Core Connections”
<p><b>Understand others’ interests</b></p> <p><b>View data, not interpretation</b></p> <p><b>Put more options on the table</b></p> <p><b>Reduce stress, anxiety and defensiveness while increasing effective communication</b></p> <p><b>Learn process for managing conflict</b></p> <p><b>Learn language protocols</b></p>	<p><b>Prepares for:</b></p> <p><b>Group work</b></p> <p><b>Creativity</b></p> <p><b>Job interviews</b></p> <p><b>Salary negotiations</b></p> <p><b>Relationships</b></p> <p><b>Parenting</b></p>

**Activity Materials**

**Handouts: 1. Protocols for language and frameworks; 2.Fisher and Ury’s Process and the Ladder of Inference**

**Activity Time Frame**

Total Time: 50 minutes

**Activity Schedule:**

- 5 min: Activity Introduction
- 5 min: Warm up: 20 questions (Black box)
- 5 min: Preparation for exercise: Review crib sheets
- 5 min: Prepare topics
- 5 min: Demonstration in front of team
- 10 min: Work in pairs with observers;
- 10 min: Swap pairs and run the exercise
- 5 min: Rerun demonstration
- 5 min: Debrief

## Setting Up The Activity

### Safety Considerations

Avoid using real group conflicts or genuine conflicts unless it is around impersonal issues such as scheduling meeting times or due dates. Rather than dealing with individual attitudes or problems, the session should be focused on a neutral role play that allows the team to practice the process.

## Facilitation Instructions

### Step 1: Introducing the Activity

Say the following (in your own words):

Much of managing conflict has to do with **choice**: choosing a process and choosing language that serves the purpose of **discovery and learning** within a safe, friendly atmosphere. Often, though, discussion degenerates until the most forceful, powerful least patient person wins (the friendly battler). To improve options for all decision making, this exercise is meant to help you learn a process that will allow you to create more options and understanding among decision makers.

First, to improve, maintain an attitude of exploration and “win/win”. By understanding that a discussion, even a heated one, can be a process for discovery, the listener can create the environment for creativity and collaboration.

To do this, it is useful to consider:

Begin carefully. Open the door, don't shut it down.

Discussion is not just nailing things down: it means sharing and understanding information.

Do not rush to making a decision: wait until all interests are on the table

Do not assume that talk is about saying what we already know: it is a means of exploring our own experience and information to create meaning.

Our session today will help you explore a process for opening up discussion leading to better decision making and managing conflict.

### Step 2: Overview the Activity Schedule

Overview the goals and schedule with the team members (in your own words):

*The purpose of this activity is to make conscious your question-asking, leading discussion skills and to enhance discovery.*

1. *Practice asking questions*
2. *Prepare for a discussion by sorting out positions on a simple topic*
3. *Practice introducing the “process” and following the process*

#### 4. Practice language protocols

##### Step 3: Warm up Exercise

###### Choose partners

Select an A and a B. Face each other. A holds a Black Box.

A begins by taking an “object” out of a black box. Ask “A” to mime holding the box and choosing an object before removing it and holding it. B then begins asking questions. Rather than guessing what was in the box, ask questions. **RULE: All questions have to have “yes” or “no” answers.**

**(Object of exercise: don’t guess or take a “position” too soon. Create possibilities first. Without hearing more details from the person with the object, we have a hard time discovering what the object is. Our ability to guess is limited by our patience and willingness to play.)**

##### Step 4: Overview the RULES.

Here are the rules:

1. Check your attitude: Create Discovery/Learning.  
Begin with the attitude that every position is based on interests that if understood can lead to understanding and more options.
2. Assume a Win/win vs. Win/Lose is possible.
3. Practice using open-ended, non-judgmental, exploratory language. Be polite in language and in tone.
4. Focus on parties’ underlying “interests” of each position taken (Dig; go down the ladder of inference.)
5. The Problem: Don’t argue over Positions
6. Review with the team: The Method, from Roger Fisher and William Ury’s Getting to Yes
  - a. Separate the People from the Problem
  - b. Focus on Interests, not Positions
  - c. Invent Options for mutual gain
  - d. Use Objective Criteria

##### Step 5: Exercise II. Preparation

**Give pairs one of the four questions. They need to prepare their “positions” and their reasons for those positions.**

**Choose an “A” and a “B” in each pair.**

**For 7 member groups, ask one person to observe a pair.**

**\*\*\*Have the observer make notes on a page with 2 columns, left side is what they hear, right side is what they feel or see the pairs doing.**

**Step 6: Run the exercise with one pair in front of group to illustrate process and then run parallel activities.**

**Ask “A” to begin by briefly stating his/her position. “B” will ask questions to gather as much data as possible.**

- 1. Purpose: In their role play, “B” will separate the person from the problem by framing an invitation to hold the discussion. “B” will ask questions to understand interests.**

**After both sides have been heard and understood, then they can move on to the next step in the process:**

- 2. Begin to clarify their options and create “Objective Criteria” to decide which options will satisfy both parties.**

**TOPICS: CHOOSE WHAT WORKS FOR YOU.**

1. The city or the country mouse: choose your favorite place in the world

Write out why it is your favorite place.

Person A. Begins with –Take a position: this is the best place in the world, names it and argues for it.

Person B. Understand as fully as possible why this is the other’s favorite place.

Switch positions, Person A will ask questions of Person B.

Then move on to clarify options and create objective criteria.

2. Choose a cuisine you think is the best in the world. Make a list of why that is so for you.

Take a position: this is the best cuisine in the world. Etc.

3. Negotiate salary:

Describe the job you want for the summer and the organization. Exchange the job description with another person.

Each of you must decide what this job is worth in your organization:

Give the Position a title

A Salary

A reporting line

4. Choosing to buy a car together:

You and another can afford only one car together.

Individually, separately, write out the model and kind of car you want. Include how much you will pay.

5. Apple v. PC Take a position on what you prefer. Write out five reasons why.

Take a strong position to begin

Then discover each other’s interests underlying positions

Then try to create options

And determine objective Criteria to select options decision making

**STEP 7:** (if time permits) Optional Exercise following the parallel pair exercise:

**Begin with everyone listening to one pair. Then ask a second pair to begin by picking up data from the first pair, but basing their opinions on their own ideas. Next, bring in a third pair.**

**The first pair will identify interests.**

**The second pair will practice generating options.**

**Then, ask a third pair to begin building on the options, creating objective criteria and selecting a “win/win” option.**

**Step 8: Lead a Debrief of the Activity**

1. How did you experience the exercises? What was hard? What was easy?
2. What did you learn from your partner?
3. What can you do to practice the language protocols?

**Step 9: Summarize the Activity and Explain What Happens “Next”**

Next week: Come prepared to give feedback to each other member of the team. Think about what you might want to say before the session. Consider the protocol for giving and receiving feedback rehearsed earlier in the lab: “Solicit Agreement to discuss feedback”, Provide evidence (describe the action); “Discuss impact”-how it made you feel.