

PEACEMAKING SKILLS

DIALOGUE SKILLS FOR MANAGING CONFLICT

There are several foundational principles and many skills for building peace and increasing dialogue among people who differ greatly on important topics. The following pages are designed to help you learn several sets of skills in sequence to build connection in very difficult circumstances.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES FOR RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE

- **APPROACH** conflict with the intention of good will and compassion.
- **PRACTICE** the skills of respectful dialogue in a neutral setting before using them in “charged conflict” situations.
- **VALUE** what you can learn from making mistakes without judging yourself or the other or imposing shame.
- **ENGAGE** in the process of “leftovers.” Value the power of dialoguing about unfinished business and seeking common points of connection.
- **EMBRACE** optimism and confidence in the possibility of achieving a win-win resolution to any conflict.

These handouts are presented in sequence. Start with the first skills and build on each, using the acronym: S-U-D-S

S
for
SAFETY

U
for
UNDERSTANDING

D
for
DIALOGUE

S
for
STRATEGIES
for Win-Win Solutions

SET THE STAGE FOR SAFETY

Take time to go through these steps slowly and practice them before you enter a dialogue session. Prepare a safe ground for discussing the topics in which you differ.

SOMATIC SKILLS:

Find safety within yourself first

- **Recognize your distress responses:** Notice a contraction/collapse of breath, posture, and attention (“smallify”), which trigger oppositional thinking and acting.

- **Practice expansive, centering and grounding skills:**

1. Breathe (relaxed jaw/loose tongue/soft belly),
2. Embody love (think of something/someone that makes your heart smile), and
3. Radiate out this sense of love in six directions (i.e., below, above, to both sides, and front/back; “biggify”).

A mind/body state of awareness, calmness, kindness and centered power are important foundations for conflict resolution.

- **Call a time-out for centering:** Take time to re-center when needed. The content of the conflict is secondary to establishing safety.

CO-DEFINE SAFETY GUIDELINES:

Find safety between you

- **Brainstorm guidelines for respectful discussions:**

Find ways to see the glass as “half full,” take responsibility for your part of the communication breakdown, take turns listening, refrain from blaming language, and advocate for both sides.

- Ask the other person what he/she needs from you to make this interaction safer.
- Let the other person know what you need to feel safe to express your views.

- What can you do to make it safer for you to stay in the discussion and make the interaction productive?

- **Explore and identify what you both have in common:**

Name the values, needs, intentions, memories, dreams, and bonds you share. Write them out on a large paper so they are always visible.

- **Build a Truce:** Endorse the ways you can build trust while still having significant differences.

- **Commit to Inclusion vs Exclusion:** Name your desires to understand the meanings and purposes of the other, try to find openings to enter the same circle, limit opportunities to push the other out, and name ways you are in the same camp.

- **Set limits on the negative:** Decide what you will not do. If they occur, decide how you will take a timeout and re-set your intentions and skills. Some examples:

- What are each person’s boundaries and limits?
- What has occurred that has been costly or toxic to you and the other person?
- How can you notice what you do to create part of the breakdown?
- What will create future safety for each of you together and in your larger community?
- What are your agreements about confidentiality and “no gossip” guidelines?
- When and how will you seek outside facilitation if you reach an impasse you cannot solve after several attempts?

BUILDING A TRUCE

How you can get from: Power Struggles to Trusting Your Partner? From Overt Conflict to Creating Safety?

You might each agree to try one or more of the following:

- Not bring up past hurts or sore spots in everyday conversation.
- Limit discussion about past problems to only a safe place and time – in a pre-planned setting or possibly with a mediator.
- Look for some ways the other person may be right or actually have a good point (this search can be private – unspoken – until you feel safe enough to share it).
- Say that you are pleased with the areas you do agree on.
- Agree to spread “good gossip” about the other person to others regularly.
- Remember the other’s point of view is real and durable, and is as important to them as yours is to you.
- Consider the possibility that the other’s point of view makes sense in a way that you may not yet fully appreciate.
- Play with the thought that there are potential ways that each point of view might be worked into a healing solution.
- Try out experimental agreements that aim at compromise (for example): Take turns – Try one person’s idea for a couple of weeks, then switch to the other person’s idea for a couple of weeks and then evaluate the situation at the end of that time.

LISTENING FOR UNDERSTANDING: THE PRELUDE TO DIALOGUE

Sometimes it is difficult to listen to someone with a different perspective because of a fear of opening up and losing one's own viewpoint and identity, especially if this means listening to validate and empathize with the different perspective. Listening to a different viewpoint to understand involves an ability to cognitively set aside the beliefs and reactions that are important to you so that you can join with another and experience their viewpoint and then come back to who you are. The steps below may help you connect with the other's viewpoint without losing your own.

What the Listener Does:

1. Clear your mind. Breathe deeply to relax. Focus on the other person.
 - a. Ground yourself into your best sense of self.
 - b. "Help me understand what your view is of X, how you came to experience X, and why it is important to you."
2. Focus your attention on the speaker. Find a way to follow closely what the other person is saying. Use whatever technique works for you:
 - a. Repeat in your mind word for word what they are saying.
 - b. Settle into your most calm feelings and let their core message sink in.
 - c. Take notes while they are talking if it helps you concentrate.
 - d. "Try on" their ideas, setting aside your own ideas for the moment knowing you can always come back to yourself.
 - i. Picture a cartoon bubble over their head, then another over yours— let the bubbles float side by side, nor agreeing or disagreeing.
 - e. Note: When your mind wanders, repeat step one.
3. Set aside preconceived ideas. Check if your opinion/bias are interfering with listening
4. Stay curious
5. Summarize the whole message to yourself. If there are different parts, list each part. If the other person wants to know if you've understood what they said, summarize for them what you heard: "Let me see if I'm getting all this"
 - a. When speaker is finished, mirror as closely as can speaker's words. Exact words or paraphrase—no interpretations (Flat reflection)
 - b. After reflected, ask, "Did I get that?"
 - c. If didn't, "Send again—tell me—the piece that I missed."
6. Validate:
 - a. "I'd like to hear more. Is there more about that?"
 - b. "I can see how that it would meaningful to you"
 - c. "I understand more of who you are now"
 - d. "I understand something new about you"
 - e. "Thank you for letting me know that"
7. If speaker doesn't feels heard, "Can you tell me more about that?" or ask open-ended questions to understand
8. Empathize:
 - a. "If I were in your shoes, I would feel X."
9. Go back to your own thoughts and feelings. Let them stay side by side with the other person's thoughts and feelings.
 - a. Your own identity or sense of self can remain grounded while you do this.
10. When it is your turn to talk, remember to use words that show the other person how you have tried to understand their meaning.

LISTENING FOR UNDERSTANDING: THE PRELUDE TO DIALOGUE

FIVE STEPS TO REMEMBER

1. Clear your mind.

- Breathe deeply to relax
- Focus on the other person

2. Find a way to follow closely what the other person is saying.

Use whatever technique works for you:

- Repeat in your mind word for word what they are saying.
- Settle into your most calm feelings and let their core message sink in.
- “Try on” their ideas, setting aside your own ideas for the moment.
- Picture a cartoon bubble over their head, then another over yours – let the bubbles float side by side, nor agreeing or disagreeing.
- Take notes while they are talking if it helps you concentrate.

Note: When your mind wanders, repeat step one.

3. Summarize the whole message to yourself.

If there are different parts, list each part. If the other person wants to know if you’ve understood what they said – summarize for them what you heard.

4. Go back to your own thoughts and feelings.

Let them stay side by side with the other person’s thoughts and feelings.

5. When it is your turn to talk, remember to use words that show the other person how you have tried to understand their meaning.

LISTENING TO YOUR PARTNER

LISTENER

1. **Ask yourself** whether you're calm enough to listen while setting your own interests aside for a few minutes.
2. When you are ready, **start by following the speaker**, word for word, concept by concept, feeling by feeling. Give attention with a receptive heart so you can repeat what they're saying with almost complete accuracy.
3. **Notice when you are interpreting** rather than hearing what is being said.
4. When your partner has completed an idea of feeling and pauses, **repeat what was said and felt** – at first do this word for word and identify the feeling as fully as you can. Don't comment on whether you agree or disagree.
5. **Ask you partner** if you've "got it." If they say no, ask them to repeat, clarify or add to their idea or feeling.
6. **Listen again** repeating steps two, three and four. Repeat this cycle until your partner says you understand them.

SPEAKER

1. **Relax** inside for a minute and ask yourself if you want to be understood without trying to convince the other person or get agreement.
2. When you are ready, **describe both your ideas and feelings** in short segments – remember, several sentences (or about 30 seconds) is a lot for your partner to attend to and remember accurately.
3. **Talk only from your own perspective.** Remember the other person will have their own perspective and they don't have to agree with you to understand.
4. When you're finished, **listen to their response** to see if it is accurate. If it is, say so, and thank them. If not, realize that they are trying to understand, and repeat what you said again – as clearly and as calmly as you can.
5. **Repeat steps** two, three and four until you feel understood.

BOTH

1. **Switch roles** every few minutes. Take short turns as a regular conversation does. You can listen more naturally this way.
2. If you agree with your partner, **keep it brief.** If you want to add more, wait until it is your turn.
3. If you feel like defending your point or you have a counter argument, **take a deep breath and go back to the intention** that you want to be understood, not that you need to defend yourself or convince your partner.
4. Agreement and feelings of **connectedness will come naturally** over time using this process. The need to be right or have the most verbal power will only keep the conflict intact.
5. This process is a prelude to negotiation or compromise. It is never a prelude to agreeing to disagree. **These steps do not solve conflict**, but they allow your hearts to remain open in order to clarify what you each believe.

CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE: EXPLORING OUR DIFFERENCES

Harmony in our interactions is achieved by the coexistence of differences, just as many machines require resistance to operate effectively. Engagement in dialogues that address our differences may be more difficult than avoiding, judging, or minimizing those differences. Try these tips:

Stay aware:

- Remember to practice grounding and centering skills to increase safety, empathy, and understanding that you have already built. Go back to those skills as needed as you explore and face differences.
- Recognize you have conflicted, inner voices that may represent aggression, compassion, wisdom, bias, fears, and hopes, etc. Practice awareness of these voices and learn how to understand their intention and how to balance them and even how to partner them together.

Be curious:

- Be curious about exploring your desire to know the full story and the big picture of your opponent's position.
- Allow for the possibility that you have blind spots in your understanding of yourself, the other, and the situation.
- Identify common ground and differences: Consider creating a diagram of 2 overlapping circles in which you put your views in 1 circle, the other's views in the 2nd circle, and views that you may share in the overlap of the 2 circles.
- Challenge yourself to maintain an awareness of your partner's humanity no matter how deeply you disagree. Dignify and honor the other person rather than shame or attack.

Take turns:

- Alternate speaking carefully, one important idea and/or feeling at a time. Say as much as you feel listener can hold at a time and why it is important to you
- Remember, "slower is faster" at this stage of dialoguing differences.

- Remember that this "process" is more important than any agenda to "fix" the differences.
- Talk about self and own experience: Use "I statements"
- Shift the focus from being adversarial to understanding:
- Notice your reaction to sharing and if you are triggered by past expectations
- Reflect back, validate, and empathize with what the other person has said
- Continue asking/sharing, "What do I have to gain and/or lose if I open up to the validity of what the other is believing, feeling, or needing?"

Open up to ideas:

- Consider that many situations do not require being right or wrong.
- Honor differences as possibly additive, not contentious.
- Notice when a new idea or awareness occurs. Stop, let it sink in. Write it down. You don't have to agree with it.
- Hold your ideas and the other's in your mind at the same time. This expands your tolerance to seeing many views and for holding the tension of opposites without undue stress.

Dialogue first, negotiate next:

- Wait until you both understand and respect your differences before trying to negotiate any strategies or solutions to solve any situation.

DEBATE AND DIALOGUE

Debate

Dialogue

Assuming that there is a right answer and you have it.

Assuming that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can craft a new solution.

Combative: participants attempt to prove the other side wrong.

Collaborative: participants work together toward common understanding.

About winning.

About exploring common ground.

Listening to find flaws and make counter arguments.

Listening to understand, finding meaning and agreement

Defending our own assumptions as truth.

Revealing our assumptions for re-evaluation.

Seeing two sides of an issue.

Seeing all sides of an issue.

Defending one's own views against those of others.

Admitting that others thinking can improve one's own.

Searching for flaws and weaknesses in other's positions.

Searching for strengths and value in the other's positions.

By creating a winner and a loser, discourages further discussion.

Keeps the topic open even after discussion formally ends.

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SEEK WIN-WIN SOLUTIONS

COLLABORATION STRATEGIES FOR NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCES

We often view conflict resolution or management as requiring a winner or loser. Even in compromise, the resolution is too often evaluated in terms of how much was sacrificed or lost. An alternative approach is collaboration in which all parties in the conflict *seek to blend rather than eliminate differences*. In this approach to conflict resolution, the ideas of both (or more) parties are added – or “linked” – to achieve a win-win solution whereas in compromise ideas are deleted – or “sacrificed” – to find a resolution that is a lower standard of satisfaction.

Here are some ideas:

Strategies are different from solutions:

- Strategies are ideas or skills for finding a solution or creating peacekeeping skills when a solution does not seem possible.
- Solutions are agreements or behaviors that solve the problem, even if over a long time.
- Try both.
- Focus on what worked, tinker with what did not.
- Get support from those people who support all sides, strategies, and solutions.

Search for more options:

- Seek for a third option that takes both points of view into account.
- Brainstorm many options. Don't judge them, just throw them onto the negotiating table. The more options, the more we have to work with.
- Ask others who share your dilemmas for their ideas, strategies, and solutions
- Overcome the need to seek simple solutions; understand that blending differences simplify the process of achieving dynamic solutions

Experiment: Complex problems often require complex solutions

- Try out various options for short periods.
- Evaluate together any parts of the experiments that helped.

Restore justice: Witness the hurts

- Be open to hear how the other person has been harmed by your actions or by those who are similar to you.
- Make amends: Healing occurs when those in position of power (e.g., leaders, parents, authorities) give back power (e.g., rights, choices, protection, and dignity) to the minority.

Work toward peace but have realistic expectations of resolution

- Identify your unrealistic expectations for yourself and others. Unrealistic expectations create failure, anger/frustration, and despair.
- Foster autonomy, agency/choice, and self-determination: Diversity is the rule.
- Accept reality and the limits of yourself and others, instead of trying to change you or them.
- Grieve and adapt/reinvest in new dreams that carry the essence of the old dreams.
- Continue to promote peacemaking efforts: Contribute energy toward resolution.

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