

Reflecting on Conflict and Its Resolution in Our School-Community

Recommended Content of the Three-hour Introductory Session for Staff

The Place of Conflict Resolution in Schools

Perceptions and Definitions of Conflict

Personal Style Assessment

Overview of the Conflict Resolution Process

Conflict Inventory

Visioning our Future

Backwards Planning to Achieve the Vision

Seeking Consensus on the Need

Clarifying Next Steps

The Place of Conflict Resolution in Schools

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Introduction-- Conflict Resolution has been gaining acceptance in government and business for the past twenty years and in education for the past fifteen years. It is a phrase applied to a range of skills and activities that share concern for responding to conflicts in the manner that uncovers and exploits the opportunities inherent in them. These skills and activities are designed to promote justice and protect the interests of all those involved in a conflict situation; they consist largely of collaborative problem solving, negotiation, group process facilitation, arbitration and mediation.

The idea of non-violent, collaborative problem solving in response to conflict is increasingly viewed as a critical skill for the health and effective functioning of individuals, groups, communities, organizations and society at large. We are turning to the field of conflict resolution for help in addressing some of our most pressing and systematic problems such as: rampant violence, overburdened courts, overcrowded and non-rehabilitative prison systems, family relations, community disputes, discrimination and prejudice, poor labor relations, international relations, organizational and institutional gridlock, and unending continuous public debates about social problems.

Unresolved conflict exact very high costs in both human and material terms. Realization of this fact is fueling a ground-swell of interest in conflict resolution and the various forms of practice that it takes. In practical terms, conflict resolution is approached through a handful of strategies including *specialized services, skills training, and program development*.

Specialized services involve the use of individuals with expert knowledge in this field to intervene and provide a range of services and technical assistance to individuals, groups and organizations. Such services include group and meeting facilitation, arbitration and mediation. Specialized services also include the design of education and training programs, as well as the design of alternative dispute resolution systems for communities, groups and organizations.

Skills training includes assisting others in the acquisition of dispositions and skills necessary for resolving inter- and intra-personal conflicts, negotiating effectively, functioning in collaborative groups, using consensus decision making, and mediating the disputes of others.

Program development services relate to the design, implementation and evaluation of programs intended to institutionalize the capacity for alternative dispute resolution (ADR) within an organization or unit. ADR is a phrase used to describe a host of techniques that provide an alternative to continuous, positional approaches (including violence or litigation) to handling conflict. These alternatives include principled negotiation, arbitration and third-party mediation.

Conflict Resolution in Education-- Within any single sector, such as the legal system, counseling, labor relations or education there is a wealth of opportunities for application of the basic principles of conflict resolution. For example, within education alone there are numerous avenues through which the work is pursued. Intervention work in schools tends to target activity at four different levels: discipline (e.g., classroom management practices); curriculum (e.g., conflict resolution curricula); pedagogy (e.g., cooperative learning) and culture (e.g., governance, labor-management and school-community relations).

Currently, the majority of school-based activity focuses on working with teachers and students on matters of discipline, curriculum and pedagogy. However, we have only begun to view conflict resolution as a key partner in affecting change in schools in more profound and fundamental ways: by shifting power structures; by addressing those conflicts that inevitably arise in intense change efforts; by changing critical intra- and interpersonal habits; and by

facilitating the conversations regarding the expectations we hold for ourselves, our students, our institutions and our communities.

The real contribution of this work lies in its ability to reshape the culture of schools in a manner that promotes the development and institutionalization of dispositions and skills required of a true democracy: debate, dialogue, consensus building and collaborative problem solving. Schools and school systems are stratified, hierarchical, often autocratic institutions that have a reputation for being both conflict ridden and at the same time conflict avoiding. Schools have a high need for maintaining order and individuals have a high need for saving face. These needs inhibit, causing fear of confrontation and avoidance of dealing with differences. Conflict resolution offers schools the tools for transforming themselves into a true student-centered, learning communities where diversity is seen as a strength and conflict is viewed as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Such a transformation of school culture requires a systematic approach to change. This would require that all of the various stakeholders in education examine current practices in light of the goal of collaborative approaches to the resolution of conflict. The work can be pursued on many fronts. These include:

- * Board development;
- * Professional development of administrators;
- * Professional development of teachers, counselors, and other staff;
- * Facilitation of educational reform planning and implementation;
- * School policy and practice re: discipline and classroom management;
- * Prejudice reduction and diversity training;
- * Crisis intervention and violence prevention;
- * Labor-management relations;
- * School-community relations;
- * Curriculum programs in conflict resolution;
- * Peer mediation programs; and
- * Design of decision making and dispute systems for schools

Many are looking to our educational system for help in addressing problems of the larger society. This is fueling debate about the nature of education and the future of schooling. That debate is happening in halls of government, in board rooms, on campuses and in faculty lounges. There is a tremendous opportunity to rethink our goals and most especially our strategies for pursuing a vision of what education could be.

Unfortunately, our collective efforts are being shortchanged due to our inability to communicate effectively with one another. Too few possess the skills to disagree agreeably, to educate one another, to be persuaded by relevant and compelling evidence, and to channel strong emotion into constructive dialogue. While peer-mediation, curriculum-based student programs and new instructional methods are key strategies for bringing about needed changes in schools, the real opportunity of this moment lies in our ability to negotiate a collective future with one another. Schools and their constituents need help navigating the uncharted waters of authentic school reform. Conflict resolution is a natural partner to this change process. Transforming schools into conflict resolving cultures is not the ultimate end goal, but it is certainly a critical means to our desired end, quality education for all.

**" . . . Through understanding, flexibility, and negotiation,
children learn to resolve problems assertively, without
violence.**

**But the real challenge presented to education and to all is to
become what we teach.**

**The example that we set tells children more about how we
really feel and think than words do . . ."**

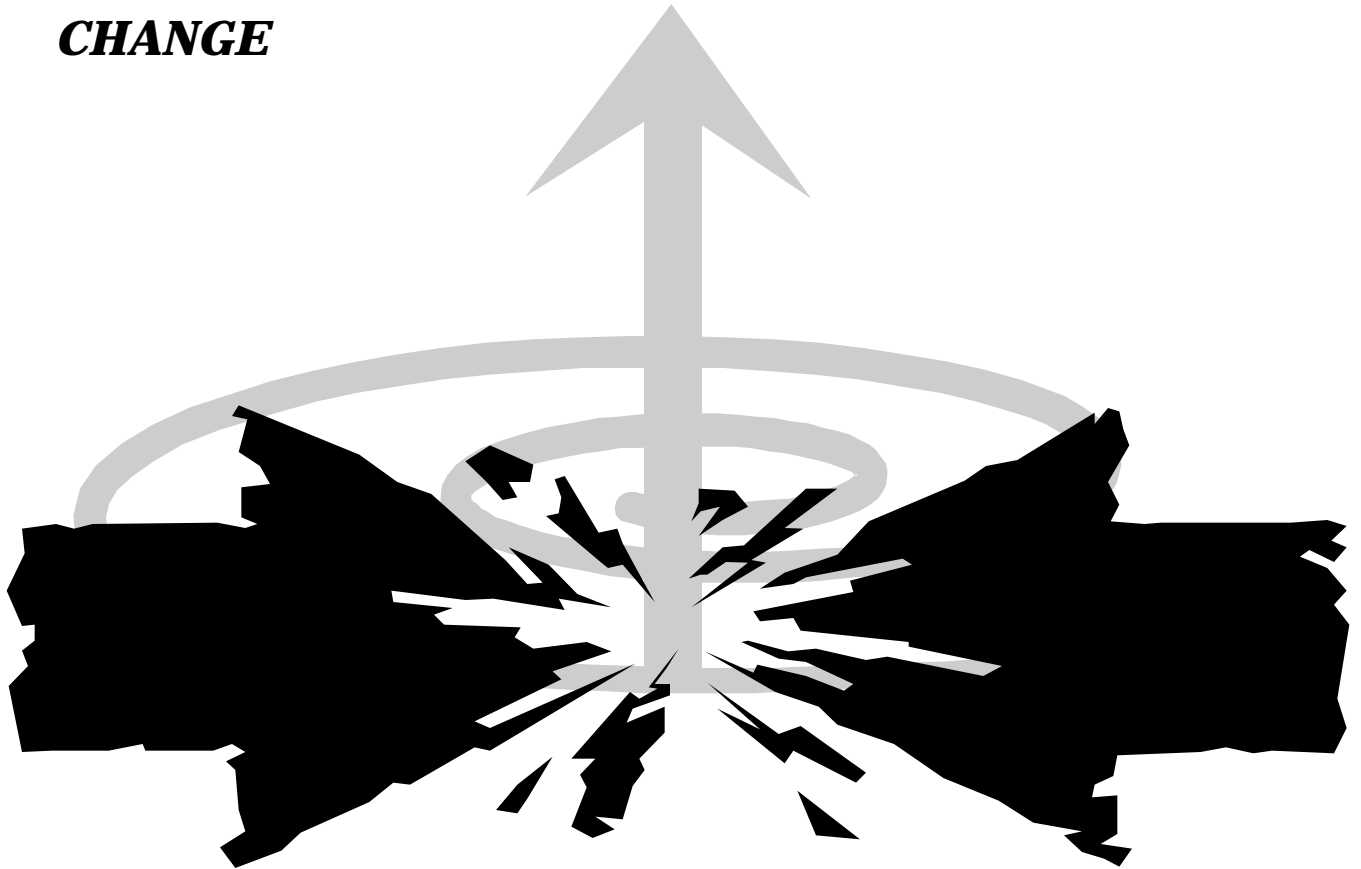
Yogesh K. Gandhi, Founder
Gandhi Memorial
International Foundation

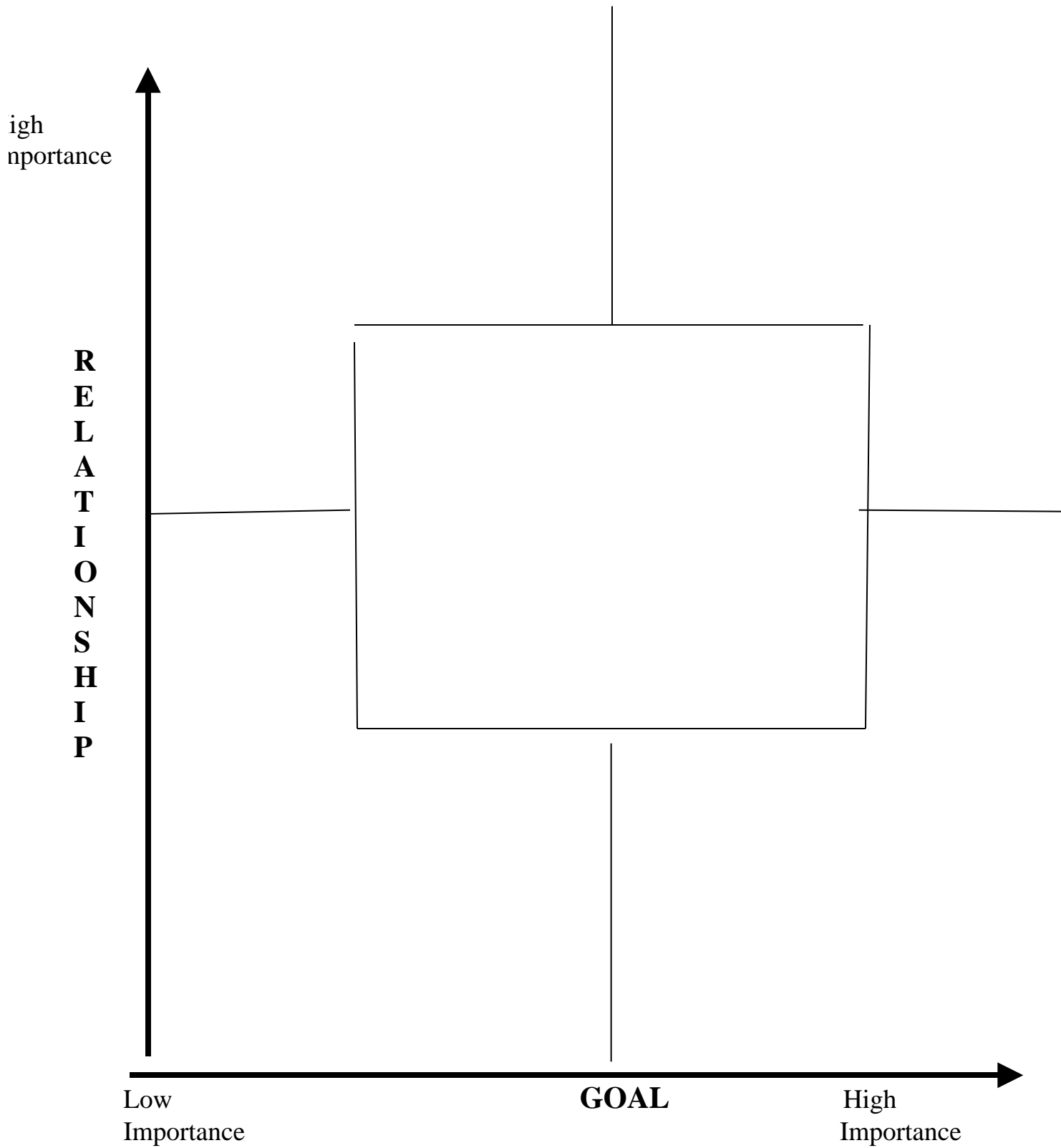
Conflict is. . .

. . . what happens when people disagree

. . . a perceived divergence of interests

***. . . AN OPPORTUNITY FOR POSITIVE
CHANGE***





"Pick a Style...Any Style" Conflict Game

Directions:

- Gather into groups of 4-6 people. Get a deck of conflict style cards from the presenter. Decide which two people will play the first round. Placing the cards face down, have each of the two players choose a card.

PLAYERS: Do not let anyone else see your card. Using the first conflict scenario below, **act out the conflict using the style written on your card**. Limit your time to 2-3 minutes per conflict and pair. (Where necessary, chose before-hand who will play which role.)

OBSERVERS (Everyone else!): **Raise your hand when you think you know the styles being used by each player**. When nearly all hands are raised, have the observers guess which style each member of the pair was using.

Observers: What clues did you use to guess the styles? Be specific.

Players: How did it feel to play that style and to play opposite the other's style?

All: What patterns are likely when these styles interact?

Conflict Scenarios

1. Two people trying to decide who will get to ride in the front passenger seat of the car on a long trip.
2. Two couples are going on vacation together. One wants to go camping. The other wants to see the sites of a big city. (Note: Assign preferences to the players.)
3. Two people who share limited clerical support both need help making a very important deadline.
4. Three members of a steering committee (that operates by consensus) are in disagreement over whether or not a "outside" facilitator would be helpful for an upcoming retreat. One wants to facilitate the meeting him/herself, one wants a non-involved staff member to facilitate and a third wants an "outside" facilitator. (Note: Assign preferences to the players in this one.)

"PICK A STYLE"

GROUP DISCUSSION

Observers guess which style is being used.

Observers tell what clues they observed for each style that was used.

Players/Disputants talk about how they felt playing their roles.

Were the styles comfortable for the players?

Why?

Why not?

Discuss the implications of the strategies or styles that were used.

STYLES OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

It's not whether you have conflict in your life, but how you deal with the conflict that makes all the difference.

People respond to conflict in different ways. We often use different styles in different situations.

Avoidance means that a person knows there is a conflict but chooses not to deal with it. An avoider walks away from the problem and may avoid the person with whom he or she is having the conflict.

Advantages:

Disadvantages:

Accommodation is putting aside one's own needs and concerns in order to satisfy the needs of the other person.

Advantages:

Disadvantages:

Competition is trying to win or make the other person lose by giving in. In this style, a person defends his/her position or pursues his/her own goals without regard for the needs of the other person. This style assumes that in order for one person to win, the other person must lose.

Advantages:

Disadvantages:

Compromise is giving up something in order to get something. It is an attempt to seek middle ground.

Advantages:

Disadvantages:

Collaboration is working together in order to satisfy the needs of both people. It involves problem solving and assumes that both people can get their needs met. One party does not have to win at the other's expense. It is win-win problem-solving.

Advantages:

Disadvantages:

Which style do you most frequently use in a conflict with the following people?

-Spouse

-Parent

-Child

-Sibling

-Co-worker

-Friend

-Boss

-Students

The **ACBD's** of **Conflict Resolution**

Air All Viewpoints

- Interview everyone (Active listening)
- Tell Your Side (I-messages)

Clarify the Problem

- Combine everyone's basic needs (Reframe)
- Agree on the problem (Restate)

Brainstorm Solutions

- Generate ideas, relax and don't criticize (Generate)
- Eliminate weak solutions (Evaluate)

Develop an Agreement

- Choose one or a combination of solutions that meets basic needs of all (Agree)
- Specify and document detailed agreement (Capture)

CONFLICT INVENTORY EXERCISE

Step 1: Refine the following list to reflect the key relationships in your school setting. Add any key paired relationship that is important in your setting, that is not found in the list below.

- A. student - student
- B. teacher - student
- C. teacher - teacher
- D. teacher - administrator
- E. school - parent
- F. teaching/administrator staff - other staff
- G. building - district
- H. school - school community
- I. Other _____
- J. Other _____

Step 2: Choose the relationship you have most interest in discussing with your colleagues. Move to the area designated for that particular discussion.

Step 3: Brainstorm and record (on flip chart #1) the things over which conflicts occur in that particular relationship. (e.g. Student - student conflicts are sometimes about “he said - she said” or “taking turns” or “teasing” etc.)

Step 4: Review your list and then brainstorm and record (on flip chart #2) the answers to complete this sentence “If we were to solve these conflicts collaboratively, it would **get** us _____.”

Step 5: Finally, record your group’s response to this: “In order to solve these conflicts collaboratively, it would **cost** us or **require that** _____.”

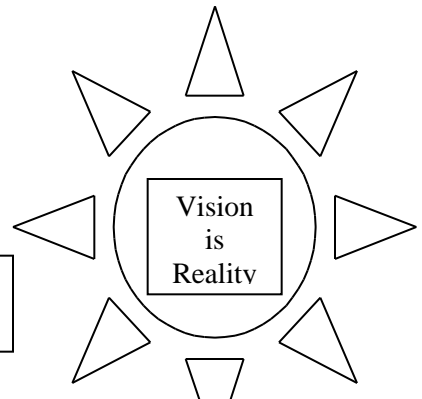
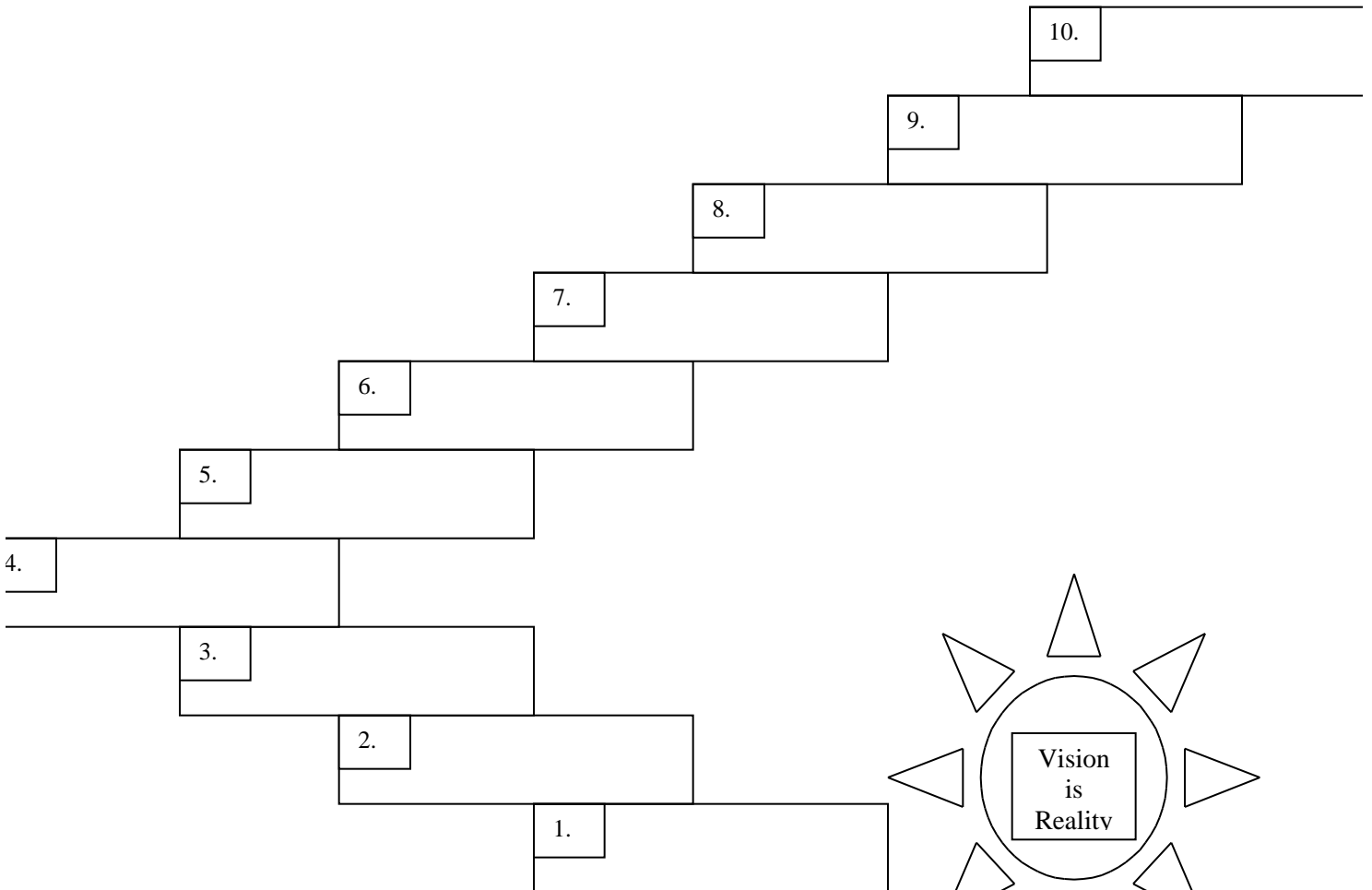
A Personal View of a Preferred Future

1. Complete the following sentence for yourself. (Be specific and concrete in describing your personal vision.)

“If we were successful at adopting collaborative approaches to resolving conflicts, our school would be a place where...”

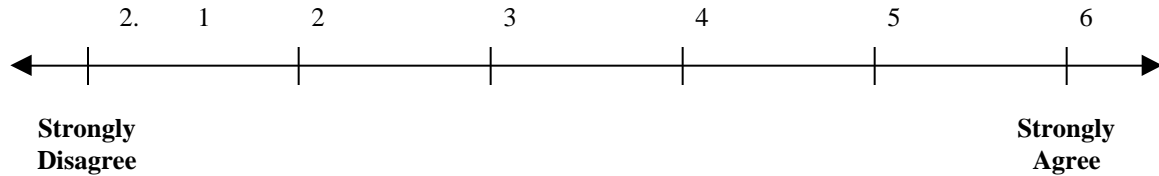
2. Consider the specific actions or steps that would have to be taken to make your vision a reality. With your end-goal in mind, plan backwards the series of steps to be taken.

“In order for my vision to become a reality, we would need to...”



Recommended Next Steps

1. “I believe that we, as a school, should pursue the adoption of collaborative problem solving and conflict resolution!”



2. I believe that we should take the following actions over the next six months:
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
3. I believe we should take the following actions over the next 1 – 3 years.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
4. “To ensure the success of this effort, my advice is ...”

Customizing Training Materials

Customized training materials make a significant contribution to the value of the training offered. It is easy to do and produces materials that are engaging for the participants. Beyond motivating participant interest, it paves the way for needed conversations in that setting.

Using information gained from the pre-decision interview, as well as from the flip charts created during the “Where is There Conflict Among Us?” exercise during the three-hour introductory session, construct exercises that deal with the conflicts occurring in that setting. It may be helpful to have a few people review draft exercises to ensure their appropriateness. Word of mouth from your reviewers about the reality-based exercises often heightens interest in the training.

Possible places to customize the materials include:

- active listening practice
- assertive speech practice
- emotion management practice
- positions vs. interest practice
- reframing the problem in terms of interests
- clarifying the problem statement
- brainstorming solutions
- evaluating options
- determining the best solution
- putting it all together role plays and practice scenarios

In short, any aspect of the training can be made relevant to the group by using their own conflicts as the basis of the exercises. When using a highly sensitive scenario or conflict, invite people to play a role or take a perspective that is not their own, in reality. This facilitates empathy for others and keeps the emotional temperature in the room at a safe level.

On the following pages are a few examples of customized exercises. They are offered here to illustrate the concept.

I-messages

1. The meeting chair is your supervisor. You raised an issue with her before the meeting on which you hold very different views. You asked if you could have some time on the agenda to open a discussion on the matter with the entire group. She agrees. An hour passes. Your issue has not been raised. She looks around the group and says “Seems like we’re finished here. See you next time!”

IMAGINE: That YOU are the person requesting time on the agenda...

THINK: How are you feeling?

THINK:What behavior causes that feeling?

THINK:Why does that behavior cause that feeling?

SPEAK: Develop an I-message that explains your point of view in a way that the listener can understand.

“

”

REFRAMING PROBLEMS

Teacher's Position

"I want my administrator to back me up with parents. I should be able to trust that my administrator is defending me to parents and assuring them that I am a professional doing a good job."

Administrator's Position

"I want to be fair and objective when a parent comes to me with a complaint about a teacher. I want parents to know that I care, I listen and I am willing to get involved to see a problem solved."

Identify Each Party's Position

Teacher's P.O.V.: "So, you want to know that your administrator has confidence in you and will defend you to parents."

Administrator's P.O.V.: "You want parents to see you as concerned, willing to hear all sides and helpful."

Clarify and Probe to Understand the Interests/Needs of All Parties

- Can you tell me more about why that is so important to you?
- How would you envision the ideal situation in response to a parent complaint?
- What is appealing about that vision?
- Can you help me to understand your objections to the _____'s vision of how parent complaints should be handled?

Reframe and Launder Information to focus on Interests/Needs

Teacher's P.O.V.: "I understand that it is important to you to have your administrator respond to parent complaints in a way that signals his confidence and trust in you. You also don't want to feel that you have to defend yourself to every parent complaint. Finally, you don't want parents and students to feel reinforced for being demanding or unreasonable, and dignifying every request or complaint encourages more of the same behavior. Did I accurately capture your interests in this?"

Administrator's P.O.V.: "You feel strongly about being accountable to parents and responsive to their needs and their children's needs. You don't want to be accused of 'closing ranks' when a problem is brought to you. Being fair is an important value to you and to be fair you need all the relevant information, so asking both parents and the teacher their side of the story is essential. Did I miss anything important?"

Restate Interests as a Joint Problem in the Form of a Question(s)

- How do we respond genuinely to parent concerns while communicating confidence and trust in our teachers?

Refocusing And Reframing Practice

Scenario #1

John is a high school drama teacher. He has one month to prepare this year's school play. He wants to have students released from academic classes for rehearsals. He has always been in charge of the production. Many students and teachers count on him to put on a quality performance each year.

Susan is a math teacher at the same high school. She does not want students to be pulled from her class for play rehearsals. At the end of the month her students have a big exam to take. She is under pressure to increase test scores. She feels that students need to review to do well on the test.

Step 1: underline each party's position.

Step 2: circle each party's interests

Step 3: Write a problem statement below that captures both parties' interests.

Scenario #2

Ms. Kaplan is the vice-principal at Grove Middle School. She has spent her entire professional life in this school. She has finally been given the go-ahead to build a private office for herself in the rear portion of a large classroom currently housing the computer lab. This will be the first private space she has ever had during her long career. She has already chosen a color scheme, picked out furniture and wall decorations.

Mr. Hernandez is the computer teacher and since his arrival three years ago, the program has received two prestigious awards in the district for innovation. He is very dedicated and protects his students interests. He does not want Ms. Kaplan to use the space in the rear of the room to construct a private office. He is worried that it will crowd the room, raise the temperature of the room from heat generated by the computers and make the room uncomfortable for the students. He's worried that students may not enjoy the lab as much if the space is cramped and as a result, the program will falter.

Step 1: underline each party's position.

Step 2: circle each party's interests

Step 3: Write a problem statement below that captures both parties' interests.
