

Engaging in Dialogue and Empathy

OBJECTIVES

- To explore strategies for improving dialogue.
- To practice active listening and respectful communication.
- To consider the impact of empathy in addressing human rights and resolving conflict.

IN THIS SESSION

Despite broadly shared humanistic aims, human rights and conflict resolution do not always follow the same trajectory; they can even have sharply divergent goals in a given situation. For instance, human rights advocates might prioritize justice for victims, exposing perpetrators, enforcing laws, protecting whistle-blowers, and ensuring the full payment of reparations, while those seeking to resolve a conflict are frequently more concerned with reducing or eradicating violence, inducing the aggrieved parties to dialogue, finding shared objectives and areas of agreement, and working out differences. Human rights workers are passionately partisan for victims of abuses, while peace-negotiators try to be impartial. Nevertheless, there are important lessons to be shared by the two disciplines. In this session, we will examine three important tools of peace-brokers that can have a profound impact on the effectiveness of human rights advocacy: dialogue, active listening, and empathy.

Dialogue: Dialogue serves a number of constructive purposes.

In its most basic form, two sides to a dispute can create the opportunity to explain their perspective and position and be heard by the other side. In the right context, under the right conditions, the two sides will look deeper into the areas where there is misunderstanding and stereotyping, which may lead to finding common ground. Dialogue, of course, is not a substitute for

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concrete steps that change the conditions that are creating the conflict. But the process of the dialogue may establish a positive pattern for the more significant structural changes that need to follow.

Active Listening: An effective listener is one who learns from what she hears. Demonstrating that one is listening closely has a salubrious effect on the speaker, giving him or her confidence that their speaking is productive. Active listening involves hearing, demonstrating that one understands what has been said, and responding in a productive manner, either in words or by expression. Active listening does not mean you necessarily agree with the speaker, but it shows that you hear and care about what he or she is saying. Active listening shows respect and it creates at least a minimum level of interaction between the speaker and the listener that may become an opportunity for deeper engagement and even trust.

Empathy: Empathy can transform the relationship between two people or between two sides to a conflict. Dialogue creates an opportunity to humanize the opposition by breaking down stereotypes and allowing for frank discourse on the areas of disagreement. If during the dialogue parties can empathize with one another, they will increase their potential for finding a resolution. While transforming the relationship between two sides will not, in itself, solve a dispute—be it contested land, past grievances, or political opportunity—empowerment and empathy can change the dispute paradigm, creating a more productive climate for problem-solving.

In this session, we will read about the role of dialogue in healing the monumental rift in Rwanda between Hutus and Tutsis after the 1994 genocide. A role-playing exercise follows in which participants will participate in resolving a dispute between a women's rights activist and a sports club president after a women's football match is canceled to appease conservative religious leaders. In the exercise, we will examine how we speak to each other, listen to each other, and empathize with each other in order to come to an agreement. Next, we will discuss two short reading selections on the power of empathy to influence dialogue, improve relationships, and heal rifts. The final reading selection is about two women from Northern Ireland, a Catholic and a Protestant, who reached across decades of mutual animosity to find a solution to the internecine violence destroying their communities.

Dialogue is a basic process for building common understanding. By letting go of disagreement, a group gradually builds a shared set of meanings that make much higher levels of mutual understanding and creative thinking possible.

—Edgar H. Schein¹⁹

Reconciliation in Rwanda: Building Peace through Dialogue

Vanessa Noël Brown²⁰

Excerpts

Facilitated dialogue in the aftermath of a national conflict can counteract otherwise destructive debates and promote reconciliation. Through the thoughtfully orchestrated use of dialogue, there is cause for optimism that Rwanda can reposition its narrative, filled with cycles of interethnic violence, to become one of Africa's 21st century success stories. Dialogue is being used in various forms throughout the country, from formal discussion clubs to academic conferences, to help Rwandans strengthen national unity and equality.

Protracted conflicts such as the Hutu-Tutsi colonial legacy in Rwanda often result in violence, due to seemingly irreconcilable differences of identity. During intrastate conflicts, such as the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, parties dehumanize the opposing side. Forging national unity in the aftermath of neighbor-on-neighbor killings poses a tremendous challenge. Today, Rwanda provides a compelling case study in how dialogue—from community clubs to academic conferences—is making a significant impact on reuniting communities and preventing hate-filled narratives from being passed to the next generation.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide stunned the world with its intensity and volume of killing in this otherwise beautiful country, located at the center of the Great Lakes region. While this tragedy will never be forgotten, Rwanda offers an inspiring example of how solid leadership and an active civil society can engage citizens in rebuilding their communities. This African nation can claim marked success in progressing from its darkest hour to a new era marked by economic development, increased security and, most importantly, the hope that national unity is indeed possible. Beyond the statistics, a recent visit to Rwanda provides a snapshot of how dialogue is being used to build interethnic reconciliation and national identity. In some cases, these aims are being achieved by helping communities to rediscover traditional conflict resolution methods while, in others, Rwandans are challenging long-standing cultural norms that contradict the notion of equality for all.

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19. Edgar H. Schein, psychologist and author, is former professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management. He has written extensively on organizational development, career development, group process consultation, and organizational culture.

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Dialogue, Culture and Conflict

Dialogue, as a conflict resolution tool, differs from other communication methods such as mediation and negotiation. Instead of participants setting out to persuade one another of the accuracy of a particular point of view, parties engaging in dialogue approach the discussion as a constructive exchange of ideas, during which they can evaluate alternative perspectives.

In the Rwandan context, dialogue is being used to facilitate community-building through the reunion of neighbors who, in some cases, were perpetrators during the genocide. While conflict resolution theorists proffer this technique as broadly useful, the reality of turning dialogue into effective conflict resolution practice depends on good facilitators and willing participants. While intrastate conflicts continue to rage in Africa, the current progress of reconciliation efforts in Rwanda offers hope for a more peaceful future.²¹

| QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- How is dialogue improving human rights in Rwanda?
- What do you think are the objectives of the people participating in the dialogues in Rwanda?
- Are their disputes or conflicts in your community that would benefit from the parties engaging dialogue? If so, describe them.

| TEAM EXERCISE

Communicating across Differences

In March 2015, the Progress Youth Club from the Malda district of West Bengal organized a high-level women's football match as part of their golden jubilee commemorations. At the last moment, organizers were forced to cancel the match due to a rumored *fatwa* issued by a local cleric. National-level players who had come from across the country were sent home. The football club's president, Reja Razi, said, "Last week some *moulavis* (clerics) raised their objection to the women's football match. . . A meeting was held . . . between us and the [clerics] who were against the match. The next day, many more clerics said the match would be against Islam. They also threatened to make a stronger agitation if the match was held. The Block Development Officer then ordered us to stop the match."²²

Scenario: A women's rights activist and sports fan living in West Bengal is outraged at the cancelation of the match and decides that she must speak out against it. As she sees it, women's rights, equality, health, and enjoyment of life are being trampled and the sports club, which initially took courageous steps to engage women, folded at the first sign of opposition. She is able to make an appointment to meet with the club president, where she intends to ask him to speak out boldly for women's and girls' right to play football and to reschedule the match. The football club president is also concerned about being

21. Conflict Trends, 2008. http://www.accord.org.za/images/downloads/ct/ct_2008_1.pdf.

22. <http://www.goal.com/en-india/news/136/india/2015/03/15/9837222/fundamentalists-issue-fatwa-against-womens-football-match-in>.

pressured by religious authorities and believes deeply that sports should be for both boys and girls. At the same time, he is anxious about stirring up trouble with religious authorities, who might take stronger action against the club on another occasion. He feels he needs to look out for the long-term interests of the club, which serves thousands of youth.

Divide the participants into teams of three. Team members will choose one person to role-play the club president, and another to role-play the women's rights activist. The third team member will observe the conversation between her teammates and record her observations.

Taking on their respective roles, the club president and the activist meet and have a five- to ten-minute conversation, during which the activist presents her concerns and tries to persuade the club president to speak up for women athletes and to reschedule the football match.

During the conversation, the observer takes notes on her teammates' conversation. Her observations may include:

- What are their styles of communication?
- How well is each listening to the other?
- How well is each responding to the arguments of the other?
- Are they discussing what they agree on? Are they able to find common ground?
- Have they made suggestions about solutions or compromises?

When the group reconvenes, ask the observers to briefly share their observations. If time permits, ask a few pairs to repeat their role-play before the whole group, changing their approach in light of what they have learned from the exercise and discussion.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Was it reasonable to expect the club president and the activist to find common ground? Why or why not?
- For the activists and the club presidents: Was it difficult to support your position? Why or why not?
- What kind of factual information would help to make the activist's communication more effective?
- What assumptions or stereotypes about each other might have affected the way the club president and the activist responded to each other?
- Were the club president and the activist respectful to each other throughout their conversation? Were they empathetic to the other's position?
- Were the club president and the activist very far apart in their goals?
- On your team, did the activist and the club president really listen to/hear what the other was saying? Were they active listening? How could you tell?

Empathy: The Human Super Power

If you work in the field of human rights, conflict resolution, or in any field that aims to reduce the suffering of others, you have probably been told at least once if not dozens of times that you are admired for your selflessness, or your charity, or your altruism. But people who think that helping others is “selfless” could not be more wrong. Why? Because of that extraordinary and profoundly human capacity: *empathy*.

Empathy is being able to imagine what another person is feeling, and in doing so finding a connection between yourself and that other person. To empathize with someone, you have to believe that the other person is in some way like yourself, an equal. Empathy starts with sympathy, when you feel compassion towards another, recognizing their needs or agreeing with their view. The super power comes when you can go one step further and imagine yourself in their position, feeling their pain or their joy. Empathy is a window and a bridge. Empathy reduces prejudice; it leaps over barriers between class, creed, race, and abilities; it inspires us to help others; and it encourages us to make decisions in the best interest of larger numbers of people. But it is not only a super power, it is a super food. Studies have shown that empathy is good for relationships and marriage in particular.²³ Another study reveals that empathetic doctors have healthier patients.²⁴

Which brings us back to why we help others. Anyone who has spent years fighting for victims, campaigning to change legislation, or educating to raise others out of poverty, knows that at its core, helping others feels good. It is not selfless at all. Because when you feel empathy, reducing another’s suffering reduces your own; bringing joy to another brings you joy. That is why charity in itself is such a small accomplishment—you can be charitable to those you feel are not your equals—divided from you by class, race, ethnicity, religion, even gender. But motivated by empathy, you are healing yourself and the world.

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23. http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/feeling_like_partners/.

24. http://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/Fulltext/2012/09000/The_Relationship_Between_Physician_Empathy_and.26.aspx.

Benefits of Empathy

Marshall Rosenberg²⁵

Our ability to offer empathy can allow us to stay vulnerable, defuse potential violence, help us hear the word “no” without taking it as a rejection, revive lifeless conversation, and even hear the feelings and needs expressed through silence.

Time and again, people transcend the paralyzing effects of psychological pain when they have sufficient contact with someone who can hear them empathically.

By maintaining our attention on what’s going on within others, we offer them a chance to fully explore and express their interior selves. We would stem this flow if we were to shift attention too quickly either to their request or to our own desire to express ourselves.

The more we empathize with the other party, the safer we feel.

Empathy allows us to re-perceive our world in a new way and move forward.

To be able to hear our own feelings and needs and to empathize with them can free us from depression.²⁶

| GROUP EXERCISE

- Ask the group to brainstorm the benefits of empathy.
- Record participants’ comments on a board or large sheet of paper.
- Ask the group to consider what empathy helps you feel, what it helps you to do, and how it helps you to do it.

| QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Why is empathy a super power?
- Do you think empathy and love are connected? Why or why not?
- Do you think a person can learn to be empathetic, or is it a skill you have to be born with? Why or why not?
- How do you think empathy can make you a better active listener?
- How does empathy make you better at relationships at work, at home, with your extended family?
- How might empathy transform people on opposing sides of a conflict?

25. Marshall Rosenberg (1934-2015) was an American psychologist and founder and former Director of Educational Services for the Center for Nonviolent Communication, an international non-profit organization.

26. <http://cultureofempathy.com/References/Benefits/Articles.htm>.

Reaping the Harvest of Peace and Justice

Ireland's struggle for independence began several centuries ago when it was conquered and then colonized by the English. Their rule over Ireland's Catholic majority was often characterized by prejudice, discrimination, and neglect, leading to poverty and famine. In 1921, Irish revolutionaries gained ground, winning a measure of national independence through a treaty. Under the terms of the treaty, six Protestant majority counties in the north were partitioned to remain part of Great Britain. Despite the Protestant majority's support for British rule in Northern Ireland, the new Irish Republic continued to formally regard the partition as provisional, as did most of the Catholics residing in the North. In recent decades, as a result of the disputed status of the territory, sectarian violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland led to over 3,000 dead in a country with less than two million inhabitants.

Against this historical backdrop, Mairead Corrigan Maguire and Betty Williams were drawn together by a violent tragedy that would transform their lives forever. On August 10, 1976, two of Maguire's nephews and one of her nieces were killed on a Belfast street corner when a British army patrol shot an Irish Republican Army (IRA) gunman whose car then plowed into a sidewalk.

After the tragedy Maguire, a Catholic, appeared on television, denouncing the IRA's violence. Williams, a woman of mixed religious background, had witnessed the accident and immediately circulated a petition. With 6,000 signatures to protest the children's deaths, she presented the petition on television two days later. At the children's funeral, Maguire and Williams, grieving and tired of senseless violence, joined forces, agreeing to strive for peace. They founded an organization called Women for Peace, later renamed the Peace People Organization.

Within a month the organization mobilized 30,000 women, both Catholics and Protestants, to march the Belfast streets. Although accused of collaboration with the enemy and physically threatened, Maguire and Williams did not stop marching and attracted more followers. Their supporters were drawn to the peace movement by their common goals. Participants discovered that they shared not only their desire to end the violence, but that people on both sides of the conflict faced poverty, lack of political autonomy, and civil liberty restrictions imposed by Northern Ireland's emergency legislation.

Maguire and Williams earned worldwide recognition for their work, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in October 1977. Williams eventually left Belfast for the United States, but Maguire continued her efforts to reeducate Northern Ireland's warring factions and to bring them to the negotiating table. Dismissed during the 1980s and early 1990s by those who considered rage the only reaction to injustice, she persisted, articulating her message of nonviolence long before the 1998 peace agreement was reached.

As Maguire explained, "I believe that hope for the future depends on each of us taking nonviolence

into our hearts and minds and developing new and imaginative structures which are nonviolent and life-giving for all. Some people will argue that this is too idealistic. I believe that it is very realistic. I am convinced that humanity is fast evolving toward a higher consciousness. For those who say it cannot be done, let us remember that humanity learned to abolish slavery. Our task is no less than the abolition of violence and war..." Indeed, she still insists that "to reap the harvest of peace and justice in the future, we all have to sow the seeds of nonviolence, here and now, in the present."²⁷

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- What were the events that inspired Mairead Corrigan Maguire and Betty Williams to seek a resolution to the conflict in Northern Ireland?
- What events allowed the two women to empathize with each other?
- What goals did Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland share?
- Does having a common goal surmount all differences between people? Why or why not?
- What role does empathy play in surmounting differences?
- How did empathy empower these two remarkable women to work together across enemy lines?
- How does empathy empower you?

27. Information from *The Vision of Peace, Faith and Hope in Northern Ireland*, by Mairead Corrigan Maguire with John Dear, S.J., ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999. This piece was adapted from a similar essay in *Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women*, Women's Learning Partnership, 2001.