Overview:

This simulation introduces students to third party mediation. Students will role-play a scenario in which two parties are in conflict and need help from an outside mediator.

Learning Outcomes:

- Students will build skills in interpersonal communication and basic conflict resolution.
- Students will build their capacity for collaboration, cooperation, and problem solving.

Information for the Instructor:

- For more information on conducting role plays, refer to "Best Practices in Writing Role Plays" in the "Additional Resources for Teachers" section of website.

Instructions:

Step 1

Divide into groups of three. If participants do not divide evenly, there will be one or two groupings that will contain 4 people. Within the groups, each individual will take on a different role. One person will represent a group of people who are 30% of the population but control the government, own most of the businesses and capital in the country and own most of the land. Another participant will represent the other 70% of the people. The two sides have been fighting for control of the country for years. Neither side is able to defeat the other. The third person will be an outsider who would like to see the conflict end. [For the group or groups that have 4 participants, there will be 2 people playing outsiders.] There is a presumption that a lack of agreement will undoubtedly lead to the resumption of fighting and killing. The details and roles can be adapted to fit a specific historic or modern context.

Step 2

For 5-10 minutes have all the participants representing the minority meet together, all those representing the majority meet together, and all the outsiders meet together. Collectively, they should discuss the interests and goals of their sides, or if they are the outsiders, talk about the problem and how outside parties might help end the conflict. Each of the third parties should consider what kind of outside role he or she wishes to play:

- Mediator and generator of new ideas and possible solutions
- Active listener and communicator between each side, including clarification of interests and relationships
- Agenda setter
- Facilitator of discussion

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Step 3

After 10 minutes, each group of 3 (or 4) participants meets together. Simultaneously in each group, the two parties (minority and majority) will try to agree on how they can live together in the same land and explore whether they might be able to share power.

They should consider the following:

- What are the problems between the two peoples? What are the main elements of those problems?
- What is the relationship between the two groups?
- What are your interests (personal and as a group) and how are those interests affected by the problems?

Both the majority and minority participants should in turn speak about the problem and his or her interests. How the third parties participate will depend on the type of role they envision in this dialogue process. When the third-party joins in, he or she should have been listening and thinking about how to help the two parties discover common interests.

- Help them explore the reasons for unresolved differences.
- Do the two parties actually understand each other?
- Can the parties be helped to consider what kind of future they would prefer?
- How might the conflict change course?
- How might the two groups change course?
- Can the outsider help the two parties find some common ground?

Third party techniques to consider might be to have the outside party restate the problem and restate each side's position so that each side has to think about whether that is really what it meant. Try to get the parties to reframe their positions; get them to separate out issues from positions. Get each party to state the reasons why their stated position is so important to them. Get them to discuss what concerns them if they don't resolve the problem. Ask them what they fear from an agreement, or from lack of an agreement. Try to get the parties away from opposing sides of the table; get the parties on one side of the table and the problem on the other side.

Step 4

After 10 minutes, suspend the meetings and have the outside parties from each group give a quick assessment of the progress (or lack thereof) in their group. Then, brainstorm with the entire group ways in which the outsiders might help the parties to an agreement.

Step 5

If time permits, return to the triad discussions, and after 10-15 minutes, halt the exercise and see where agreement was reached and where it wasn't. Talk to the participants about which ideas worked and which did not. Explore the reasons why. What happened when the third party entered the discussion? Was their role productive or counterproductive?

Applications:

This exercise can be applied to units in government, leadership, history, and social studies. It can be adapted to many different contexts or can serve as a standalone exercise for building students' capacity for collaboration, cooperation, and communication.

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