

# Understanding **CONFLICT**

## A model for improvement — Assumptions and beliefs

### Objective

- Understand and apply the concept that assumptions about success can have an impact on the results in a conflict situation.

### Audience

High school and above

### Time

15-20 minutes

### Supplies needed

- Flip chart
- Markers (for recording scores)

### Source

Adapted with permission from materials developed by Rob Ricigliano and Nancy Burrell,

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### Background

**T**he resolution of conflict doesn't have to be that one person "wins" while the other "loses."

For many of us, our assumption in conflict is that someone wins and someone loses. Most of us have had that assumption reinforced often enough in our lives that it has become part of how we think. So when we are put in a situation that implies conflict, we approach it in the only way that we know—with the assumption that one party will win while the other will lose.

But what if we want different results in conflict? Perhaps we'd like to have a situation of mutual gain, where everybody "wins"? If we change our assumptions (someone wins, someone loses), we can then change our thoughts. Changing the way we think leads to changes in the way we act, and yes, we can get a different result!

### What to do

**B**egin the session with the Arm Activity. Give no explanation about why you are doing the activity, except to say that it is an icebreaker to get the group thinking about conflict.

### The arm exercise (directions)

1. First rule in this activity is **no talking**.
2. Next you need to find a partner.
3. Each of you will assume the position that I am now demonstrating...right arms up, elbows on table, grasp hands...
4. The object of this game is to **get as many points for yourself** as you can. You get a point each time your partner's hand touches the table. You have 15 seconds. GO!

**Facilitator:** Monitor the room.

Observe those pairs that are struggling with each other (e.g.

muscles clenched and trying to win). Note any groups that are cooperating by letting their arms be put down to the table. Re-group after 15 seconds or so, and process.



## Processing

Your goal in processing is to identify the assumptions that participants made about the exercise.

- Have participants share their scores. You might want to start by asking if anyone had a 0-0 tie.
- Talk to a team that struggled (0-0 or 0-1). Ask them, "What was this like for you?" or "What did you do first?"
- Pick a team that cooperated (high score-high score). Ask them the same questions.
- Ask if any pair had someone who accommodated while the other did not.
- Summarize the activity, focusing on the assumptions made by individuals. For example, one group may have seen the activity as a competition or a struggle, while another may have seen it as an opportunity to cooperate.

**Facilitator note:** Cooperation in this activity can lead to both parties getting a high score (example: 20-20). If this happens you may want to focus on the non-verbal clues that were given to change the game from one of struggle to one of cooperation.

## Main teaching point

(delivered AFTER processing the exercises):

A simple model which explains the results we got in the activity (and also in the real world):

**Assumptions or beliefs** → **How we think** → **How we act** → **Results**

Discuss the model in terms of the arm exercise:

<b>Competition</b>	→	<b>Strike first</b>	→	<b>struggle</b>	→	<b>Score: 0-0</b>
<b>Accommodate</b>	→	<b>Let others win</b>	→	<b>give in</b>	→	<b>Score: 0-8</b>
<b>Cooperate</b>	→	<b>Cooperate</b>	→	<b>give in first</b>	→	<b>Score: 9-9</b>

Our assumptions influence how we think, then act, and the results that we get. If you want a different result, *try changing your assumption.*

## Applying the assumptions model

- Ask someone who struggled during the Arm Activity, what s/he might have done differently in the activity if his/her assumption had been that the pair would cooperate to get a good result for both parties.
- Extend the model to negotiation and conflict resolution and point out that if we want a different result in negotiation or conflict, we may want to change our assumptions before we approach the situation.
- Ask participants to share an everyday conflict situation. How might you approach that conflict if your belief or assumption was that someone needed to "win"? How might you approach that conflict if your assumption was that both parties could "win"?

## Summary

We can achieve a different result in conflict if we change our assumption that if someone wins, someone else must lose.