

Understanding CONFLICT

Objective

- Identify the Third Story in conflict.
- Utilize the Third Story as a basis for discussion with another party in conflict.

Audience

High school and above

Time

20-30 minutes

Do ahead

Prepare envelopes and cards

Source

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. 2000. *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most*. New York: Penguin Books.

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Telling the third story

Background

You know your side of the conflict. You may even know the other side of the conflict—or at least parts of it. But how would an impartial observer describe the conflict? Some refer to the story an observer would tell as the “third story.” (See Douglas Stone et al. in Sources.)

The third story is extremely useful in resolving an interpersonal conflict because it can create equal ground for the parties in conflict to discuss the situation. In this lesson, we will use the third story to approach the other party in conflict and move toward resolution of the situation.

What to do

Identifying the stories in conflict

The sides in conflict

Have two volunteers perform the attached Conflict Script. As a group, discuss the following:

- The scenario’s conflict
- How might Serafina tell her story about the conflict?
- How might the mother tell her story?

Finding the third story

There’s another story. That story is the one that an impartial observer might tell. It is known as the third story and it would be told without assigning blame—just relating the story.

What is the third story in the conflict script? How would an impartial observer tell the story?

Using the third story

Once you have identified your side of the story and the third story, it’s time to think about approaching the other party in conflict.

This is a time to use all your communication skills. One way to do this is to use the third story to describe the problem as a difference between yourself and the other party.

For example:

I want to talk to you about the meeting yesterday, and the discussion about decision-making in the club. My guess is that you and I are seeing this situation differently. I wonder if we could talk about that? I’d like to share more about how I see the situation, and I’d like to hear what you are seeing.

Guided practice in finding the third story

Have the group divide into threes. Give each group three copies of one of the conflict scenarios and have them choose roles (see Facilitator notes, Triad scenarios).

The small group will spend 10 minutes discussing their individual conflict scenarios, in preparation for telling their stories to the large group.

Processing questions

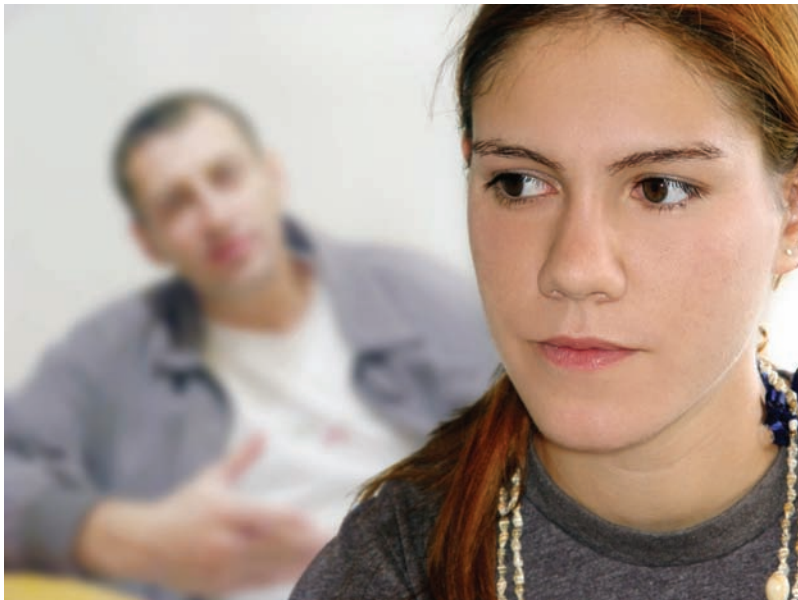
- How difficult is it for you to hear or identify the third story?
- What might get in the way of finding the third story when you are in conflict?
- What might you do to lessen or eliminate those distractions?
- What are the advantages of approaching someone with the third story, instead of your own “side” of the story?
- How would you go about choosing the right time to share the third story?
- What factors might influence successful sharing of the third story?

Enhance/simplify

- Find an appropriate video clip to use in place of the Conflict Script.

Summary

Using the third story—the one an impartial observer would tell—to describe a situation can open the door to communication in conflict.





Conflict Script—facilitator copy

Facilitator notes

Discuss the conflict that occurred in the scenario.

The conflict is over who is in charge of the 4-H meeting.

How might Serafina tell her story about the conflict?

Serafina would likely say that she and the other 4-H members are capable of making decisions and planning what the club does, but they don't get a chance to do so because the grown-ups are always interfering.

How might Serafina's mother tell the story?

Serafina's mother would probably say that while she and the other parents would like to just let the kids make decisions, they have seen too many instances where they just weren't capable of doing so, and as a result, things didn't happen as they should have.

What is the third story?

Serafina and her mother have different views of what youth are capable of doing in a 4-H club. In addition, they likely have different views of success and failure.

Conflict script

Serafina: I hope you don't take this wrong, Mom, but we kids have decided that we don't want you or any of the other parents in the room during our 4-H business meeting.

Mother: Don't want us in the room? Why on earth not?

Serafina: Well, we're tired of you telling us what to do all the time.

Mother: We don't tell you what to do all the time.

We only jump in when you need us to, like when you are going to make mistakes but that's what we're supposed to do: prevent you from making mistakes.

Serafina: We wouldn't make mistakes. You don't give us credit for being able to do anything.

Mother: I hate to bring up the last fundraiser. We let you do what you wanted to do and look what happened.

Serafina: Okay, okay. Well, what's so bad about making mistakes? Didn't you ever make mistakes when you were young? We learned a lot about how not to do a fundraiser last month, and we're ready to try again—without constantly being reminded about things that went wrong in the past.

Mother: We just want to be there to make sure you don't fail.

Serafina: And we just want the chance to make decisions on our own.



Conflict Script

Participant copy

Serafina: I hope you don't take this wrong, Mom, but we kids have decided that we don't want you or any of the other parents in the room during our 4-H business meeting.

Mother: Don't want us in the room? Why on earth not?

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Mother: We don't tell you what to do all the time. We only jump in when you need us to, like when you are going to make mistakes but that's what we're supposed to do: prevent you from making mistakes.

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Mother: I hate to bring up the last fundraiser. We let you do what you wanted to do and look what happened.

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Mother: We just want to be there to make sure you don't fail.

Serafina And we just want the chance to make decisions on our own.



Conflict scenarios

Facilitator notes

Each group will need three copies of one of the scenarios. Two members of the group will role-play the characters in the scenario; the third will observe and listen for the third story. Participants will then share their stories with the large group.

Scenario 1

As an adult who is committed to a healthy life style, Madeline was appalled when her daughter started high school. The easy availability of soda and other sugary snacks was surely contributing to poor nutrition among her daughter and many other high school students. Madeline decides to discuss this with the high school principal, and demand that the soda machines be removed from the school.

High school principal, Mr. Turner, is deep in thought when Madeline arrives for her appointment. He has been up all night working with the superintendent of schools on the budget. They will likely be over budget this year, even with eliminating two teaching positions. The only reason that the school district didn't go in the red last year was the soda machines. The amount of money that those machines produced for the school was amazing.

Scenario 2

All the years that Jerry worked in the city, he dreamed of someday owning a place in the country where he could enjoy his retirement. Jerry was an avid gardener and enjoyed growing organic vegetables for himself, his friends, and his family.

Jerry was very concerned about fertilizers and pesticide use, and used only natural products on his extensive gardens. He was looking forward to harvesting his first crop of early sweet peas. He got up bright and early (not a usual occurrence for Jerry) and made his way out to the gardens. It was a windy day, and Jerry caught drift of an unpleasant odor. He squinted to the east to see where it was coming from. Sure enough, Old Man Abramson was spraying his cornfield, and it was drifting onto Jerry's garden!

Jerry set out immediately to have it out with Abramson.

Scenario 3

Martha's lawn is her pride and joy. She tends it lovingly—watering it several hours each day. Martha is a charter member of the local Lawn and Garden Club and has been the recipient of the Lawn of the Year Award three years in a row. Martha is a good, although distant, neighbor to others in the sub-division. It is clear to those around her that her yard is far more important to her than her neighbors.

Martha's neighbor, Mr. Smith, is involved in a local group also. He is president of the Save Our Earth Club. He and others have noticed in the last few years that water pressure in their neighborhood has been fluctuating. Each house in the sub-division has its own shallow well, and the water table seems to have been stressed during the last few droughts. Mr. Smith's neighbor to the north had to drill a new well last month, and Mr. Smith fears he is next.

Mr. Smith decides to talk to Martha about what he sees as excessive watering of her lawn.