SKILLS FOR THE PEACEBUILDER – COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT HANDLING

The Parable of the Elephant

A group of blind individuals approach an elephant. The first person latches onto the leg and claims, "an elephant is a tree trunk; it is big, round and rough." The second hits the stomach and says, "A tree, no way! An elephant is like a wall: high, solid and wide." The third grabs the trunk, and exclaims "The elephant is like a snake, long and flexible." The fourth person finds the tail and replies, "No, the elephant is like a rope with a wire brush on the end!" The fifth blind person catches hold of the ears, and proclaims, "The elephant feels like a banana tree leaf."

Who is right? All are right, and all are wrong. The lesson of this parable is that we need to simultaneously see the whole and see things from the perspective of what individuals are able to see and feel.

The Parable of the Elephant demonstrates the importance of perception. It provides a useful introduction to the other topics in this module, all of which are greatly affected by perception.

Communication

Communication takes a variety of forms – speaking or verbal, non-verbal or body signals, listening, and interpreting messages. The *Transactional Model of Communication* (Wood, 2001, pp.25-26) is useful because it integrates these various forms and additional external factors that affect communication.

This particular model assumes that communication is a transaction or an interaction between two individuals, Communicator A and Communicator B. Both people send information and receive information simultaneously. Sending information takes the form of non-verbal messages (e.g. nodding your head or raising your eyebrows) and speaking. The individual receiving information listens and interprets the verbal and non-verbal messages. Both individuals take cues from the sender or listener regarding the other person's level of interest. This is called feedback – a response to a message.

The Transactional Model is useful because it takes into account internal and external factors that influence the quality of communication. The following factors are identified as important.

Time. Interactions change over time, especially as people get to know one another. When people know each other well, the way they interact and what they talk about changes.

"Field of experience." Individuals interpret messages according to their own experiences, moods, and cultural framework. These elements (experiences, moods, culture, background) make up a person's field of experience. The more the fields of experience of two (or more) communicators overlap, the less the misunderstanding in their communication.

Noise. Noise refers to whatever disrupts communication. This may be actual noise, like music or blaring horns, or things inside the communicator that hinder or distort the message. The listener might be preoccupied and thinking about what he or she needs to get done that day or what to make for dinner, while the speaker might be distracted by a commotion on the street. This interrupts concentration and is part of the noise that disrupts effective communication.

Contexts. The context is the situation in which the communication takes place. This includes shared contexts like culture as well as personal contexts like family or religion.

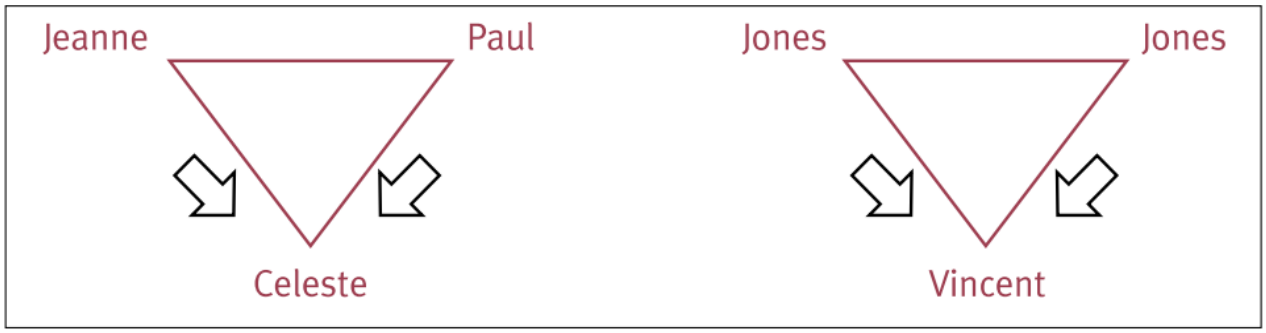
Fields of experience and context change over time. We accumulate knowledge and experience every day, and this affects the way we communicate and how we interact with others. For example, if yesterday you had a negative encounter with a police officer, this encounter will colour your next interaction with a police officer, and possibly others in uniform.

The concepts of fields of experience and context emphasise how culture and perception affect the way we send and receive messages. For example, in one culture nodding one's head up and down means "yes," while in another culture it means "no." This non-verbal message is interpreted within a particular cultural context, with entirely different meanings in two different cultures. This causes miscommunication, and possibly conflict.

Another hypothetical example demonstrates the way perceptions cause miscommunications and conflict. In a conversation, Communicator B is having trouble concentrating on a conversation with Communicator A, because she just received word of an illness in her family. She is preoccupied and this becomes noise that disrupts communication. Communicator A, on the other hand, interprets this noise to be a sign of disinterest in the conversation and what he has to say. Each person perceives the conversation in a different way. This difference in perception in terms of the conversation leads to miscommunication (receiving a message of disinterest that is not intended) and possibly conflict.

Miscommunication also commonly leads to conflict in a situation called a *communication triangle*. In communication triangles, a third person is involved. Often, when a relationship between two people becomes strained or tense because of disagreement or miscommunication, one of the individuals turns to a third person for support. This person becomes an ally of one of the individuals in the triangle. The role of the third person is often to ease the tension in the original relationship. In the figure below, for example, Jeanne has a disagreement with her husband, Paul, and talks with her friend Celeste about their disagreement, or expressions of dissatisfaction in the Jones family go through the neighbour Vincent. Triangles often become disruptive because communication between the two primary individuals (Jeanne and Paul, or within the Jones family) stops and is channelled through the third person. A diagram (Figure 5.1) is helpful in showing how communication is disrupted.

Figure 5.1 – Triangles in Communication



"De-triangling" happens when communication is restored between the two primary individuals (MCS, 1995, p.120). In some cases, a third person is brought in to help restore relationships or to resolve the conflict between the first two people. If this is the case, we refer to this person as a *third party*, whose goal is to act as an intermediary between the two individuals in conflict as to restore the relationship.

The above examples and discussion demonstrate that communication and conflict are linked. They are also linked in terms of how to work at resolving conflict (see Conflict Handling Skills below). Without the skills to communicate effectively, we cannot be effective peacebuilders. This implies that we need to understand what happens when individuals communicate, be aware of the external influences (like noise or context, including culture), and assess how these influences affect our ability to send and receive information.

Conflict and Culture

Culture plays an important role in how conflicts unfold, and how events and actions are interpreted. As discussed in Module 3, culture often only becomes obvious when it is not shared. Most of the time we take norms and assumptions for granted.

Conflict Handling Skills

In thinking and learning about how to deal with or handle conflict, we need to examine: (1) how we handle conflict in our own interactions with others (conflict handling styles), and (2) what skills are useful in dealing with conflict. This section introduces both. Conflict handling skills are crucial for those doing peacebuilding work. In your work as peace agents, you will inevitably deal with conflict, perhaps on a daily basis. These skills and learning more about how you react to conflict will help you grow and deal with the conflicts you face in your personal life, in your professional life, in your relationships with other peacebuilders, and in your interactions with those who might not agree with your peacebuilding work.

After introducing different conflict handling styles, three types of skills are introduced: problem solving, negotiation, mediation. This is followed by a brief discussion of basic third party communication skills commonly used in mediation.

1) Conflict Handling Styles

Many tools are available to help individuals be aware of the way they act in conflict. For peacebuilding, knowing how you react to conflict and communicate with people is very important. This module includes two different conflict handling style instruments, which you can use with participants.

Accommodating. People who accommodate are unassertive and very cooperative. They neglect their own concerns to satisfy the concerns of others. They often give in during a conflict and acknowledge they made a mistake or decide it is no big deal. Accommodating is the opposite style of competing. People who accommodate may be selflessly generous or charitable, they may also obey another person when they would prefer not to, or yield to another's point of view. Usually people who accommodate put relationships first, ignore the issues and try to keep peace at any price.

Competing or Forcing. People who approach conflict in a competitive way assert themselves and do not cooperate as they pursue their own concerns at other people's expense. To compete, people take a power orientation and use whatever power seems appropriate to win. This may include arguing, pulling rank, or instigating economic sanctions. Competing may mean standing up and defending a position believed to be correct, or simply trying to win. Forcing is another way of viewing competition. For people using a forcing style, usually the conflict is obvious, and some people are right and others are wrong.

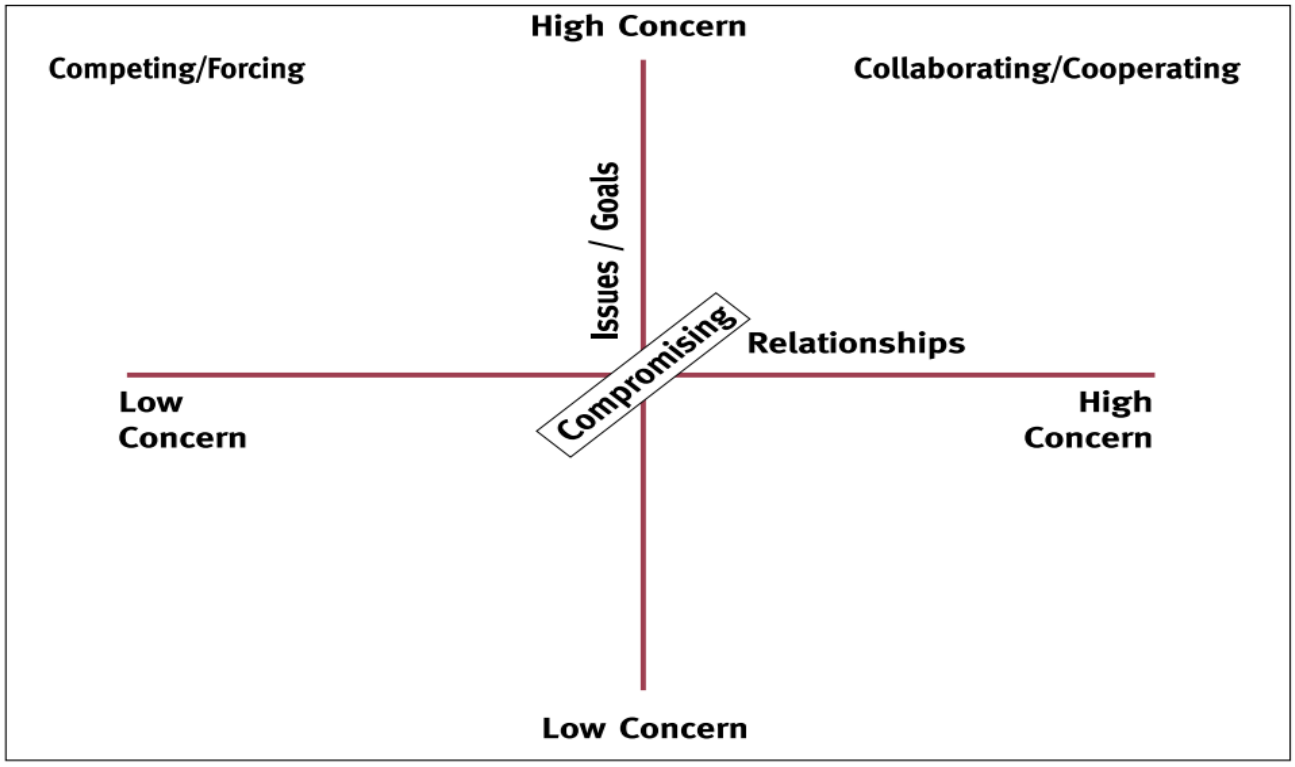
Avoiding. People who avoid conflict are generally unassertive and uncooperative. They do not immediately pursue their own concerns or those of the other person, but rather they avoid the conflict entirely or delay their response. To do so, they may diplomatically sidestep or postpone discussion until a better time, withdraw from the threatening situation or divert attention. They perceive conflict as hopeless and therefore something to be avoided. Differences are overlooked and they accept disagreement.

Collaborating or Cooperating. Unlike avoiders, collaborators are both assertive and cooperative. They assert their own views while also listening to other views and welcome differences. They attempt to work with others to find solutions that fully satisfy the concerns of both parties. This approach involves identifying the concerns that underlie the conflict by exploring the disagreement from both sides of the conflict, learning from each other's insights, and creatively coming up with solutions that address the concerns of both. People using this style often recognise there are tensions in relationships and contrasting viewpoints but want to work through conflicts.

Compromising. Compromisers are moderately assertive and moderately cooperative. They try to find fast, mutually acceptable solutions to conflicts that partially satisfy both parties. Compromisers give up less than accommodators but more than competitors. They explore issues more than avoiders, but less than collaborators. Their solutions often involve "splitting the difference" or exchanging concessions. Conflict is mutual difference best resolved by cooperation and compromise.

These five conflict styles can be put together on a grid with two dimensions: (1) degree of concern for the relationship between the parties in conflict; and (2) degree of concern for the conflict issues (see Figure 5.2, adapted from Blake & Mouton, 1979). A high degree of concern for the relationship and the issue typically yields a collaborating or cooperative conflict style. A high concern for the relationship and low concern for the issue usually generate an accommodating conflict style, while a high concern for the issue and low concern for the relationship lead to a competitive or forcing conflict style. A moderate degree of concern for the relationship and the issue will generally produce a compromising conflict style. Finally, a low concern for both the issue and relationship will typically yield an avoiding style.

Figure 5.2 – Conflict Styles and the Degree of Concern for Relationships and Issues start



This does not mean that you do not use other styles in some of your interactions. In fact, each style is appropriate in different situations. For example, if a child is in danger of touching a hot object or running into the street, you will use a competing style to prevent the child from being harmed. We each need to develop competency in all of the five styles.

2) Problem solving

Problem solving is a technique that encourages individuals in conflict to jointly define the conflict or problem, analyse its causes, suggest various options for solving the conflict, and then select and implement the preferred solution. It is a five step process in which a group: (1) defines the conflict; (2) analyses causes of the conflict; (3) generates or brainstorms options for resolution; (4) selects the preferred option; and (5) implements the solution. In many cases, step 5 (implementation) is done separately, at a later date. The DELTA manuals referred to in Section III, 3.2 (Training for Adults) use a *problem posing approach* that is very similar to problem solving, in which development issues are presented as problems to be solved.

Another similar methodology is called *appreciative inquiry*. Appreciative inquiry (AI) takes a more positive approach and analyses and appreciates the capacities that exist, rather than looking at the deficiencies or problems. It discovers and appreciates the best of what is, dreams about what might be and envisions possible impact, designs and creates what should be, and finally, takes steps to make these processes sustainable (see Appendix A, Additional Resources for more information about appreciative inquiry).

Problem solving is often used in small groups to think analytically. It is a skill that can be extremely useful in conflict, especially for jointly defining the problem or conflict. Usually not all groups agree on the causes of the conflict! Problem solving is not necessarily useful in restoring relationships, which is one of its limitations as a conflict handling skill.

In some cases, encouraging *cooperation* as opposed to competition by reorienting an individual's or a group's focus is enough to defuse conflict. Creating a situation in which two formerly competitive groups work together to achieve a common ("superordinate") goal is a useful and commonly used technique in peacebuilding programming. For example, some peacebuilding programmes have established joint projects that require former enemy groups to work together to build houses for all or that establish committees to improve the quality of education for both groups' children. Although these are often effective in promoting short-term problem solving and cooperation it isn't yet clear if these strategies work in the long-term to break down stereotypes and build relationships that extend beyond the common goal.

3) Negotiation

Negotiation is a basic way of getting what you want from someone else, usually using verbal communication. We all negotiate every day – with a vendor at the market, with our friends or relatives in deciding what to eat or where and how to travel. American authors Roger Fisher

and William Ury developed a model of business negotiation in 1981 that has become extremely popular. Essentially, they propose four principles of negotiation (Fisher and Ury, 1981):

1) Separate the people from the problem. The relationship (the "people") is separate from any substantive conflict (the "problem") you have. By disentangling the relationship from the problem, you reduce the possibility of miscommunication and emotions negatively affecting the negotiation. You want to establish good working relationships in negotiation. Deal with relationship issues, if they exist, separately from substantive issues.

2) Focus on interests not positions. Interests are underlying needs, desires, concerns, wants, values, or fears. Interests motivate people, but often individuals will state a position. For example, many countries have a position that "we will not negotiate with terrorists." This is a position, but the underlying interests probably relate to concerns and fears about personal security. In conflict, individuals and groups often state only one position. It is usually difficult to negotiate compromises on positions. Behind positions are multiple interests, and focusing on interests allows negotiators more room to generate solutions acceptable to all parties.

3) Invent options for mutual gain. This requires creativity and the commitment to brainstorm options that will be acceptable to both parties. In brainstorming, negotiators need to separate the stage of evaluating options from the stage of generating options. Both parties need to broaden the number of possible options and not search for just one option. Both parties also need to think about options that will satisfy the interests of the other side.

4) Insist on using objective or mutually acceptable criteria. Often it is possible to identify several relevant standards or criteria by which parties can evaluate the fairness or acceptability of a negotiated agreement. Negotiators can brainstorm criteria or standards in the same way as they brainstorm options.

Fisher and Ury also invented the concept of the **BATNA**. This is a term that refers to the **B**est **A**lternative **T**o a **N**egotiated **A**greement. An alternative is different than an option – it refers to a possible course of action if you do not reach a negotiated agreement. The BATNA functions as your bottom line as a negotiator and helps you determine whether or not negotiation is your best option. In order to make a BATNA useful, negotiators need to carefully analyse the costs and benefits of the BATNA, and to evaluate costs and benefits of the negotiated agreement against those of the BATNA. If individuals or groups think they can accomplish their bottom line using other methods (e.g. like a strike, violence, legal options) they will resort to those methods and not use a cooperative model of negotiation.

This model of negotiation is presented with several caveats. First, this is a culturally specific model of negotiation, developed originally for American business culture. Some cultures do not value direct confrontation, which is one of the assumptions of the model. This model of negotiation is a very direct way of dealing with conflict. Some cultures might value the use of indirect methods, using an intermediary or third party such as with mediation. In addition, this model does not take into account how other cultures apply different negotiating techniques. In presenting this model to trainees, you will want to elicit cultural elements and variations in negotiation during debriefing exercises. Second, this model does not deal with power issues or imbalance.

4) Mediation

Mediation is sometimes referred to as assisted negotiation. The main difference is that mediation involves a third party whose role is to help the parties reach a mutually agreeable solution to the problem or conflict or disagreement. Mediation is a voluntary process. The exact process of mediation differs from mediator to mediator, and according to the culture in which mediation takes place. In general, there are four stages to mediation (adapted from MCS, 1995, p.147). The descriptions that accompany these four phases relate to mediation in a North American context.

1) Introduction. During the introduction, the mediator greets the parties, describes the process and the role of the mediator. The parties, together with the mediator, establish the groundrules for the mediation session(s) before entering into the story-telling phase.

2) Story-telling. During this phase, each party tells their story from their own perspective. The mediator usually summarises each of the stories after the party has told the story. The mediator lists the issues for resolution, and the parties agree to this list.

3) Problem solving. During the problem solving stage, parties engage in a problem solving process to generate and then evaluate various options for resolving their conflict. At times the mediator uses a *caucus*, which is a separate session with each party, to explore emotions, unstated interests, or goals.

4) Agreement. After evaluating the various options for resolving the disagreement, the parties decide on a solution. The mediator facilitates a discussion about the details of the agreement – who will do what, when, and where. This is often written down, with some details about what to do if either party does not uphold his or her part of the agreement.

In a western context, mediators are seen to be impartial or neutral. This means they do not show bias toward either party but instead work to help the parties reach an agreement that is mutually acceptable. In other contexts, mediators might be seen as partial but they are acceptable to both parties. For example, a family member of one of the parties might be an appropriate mediator, provided that both parties agree on the choice of a mediator for their conflict.

Although mediation is often a more formalised and ritualised process, it doesn't have to be. Many people informally mediate between friends, co-workers, or family members, assisting with communication and restoring relationships between conflicting parties. For example, an informal mediator might listen to both sides, helping them to see the other person's point of view by restating the other person's story in language that is less accusatory. Or an informal mediator might help brainstorm possible solutions. In peacebuilding programming, mediation might be useful to resolve disagreements about how to implement a programme, or to re-establish working relationships after a conflict has erupted.

Recently, a number of scholars and practitioners of conflict resolution have documented traditional models of mediation or conflict resolution. These models often differ in detail, but generally follow some kind of accepted process for story-telling and deciding upon a resolution of the conflict. Often, the process concludes with a *ritual*, such as sharing a meal together or engaging in a cleansing or healing ritual that restores the relationships between the parties (for further discussion on ritual see Module 2). In Rwanda, for example, the traditional method of conflict resolution is called *gacaca*. It involves a panel of respected community leaders who listen to the stories of the conflicting parties and then decide upon a resolution. In the past, *gacaca* was used to resolve disputes within the community. Now, *gacaca* has been adapted to deal with some of the lesser crimes of the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

Arbitration is another way to handle conflicts and is often linked to mediation because it also involves a third party. However, there is an important difference between the two: in arbitration, the third party decides the outcome for the parties rather than the parties deciding for themselves. The parties make their arguments to the third party arbitrator, but do not have control over the process or decision. Arbitration is sometimes used as an alternative to the legal proceedings of a court with its judge and jury because it is faster and less costly. If the parties agree ahead of time to abide by the arbitrator's decision it can be an efficient way to conclude a dispute, however the process does not attempt to repair or transform broken relationships.

5) Third Party Communication Skills

In communicating effectively, many conflict resolvers and communication experts emphasise the importance of particular communication skills. These skills are extremely useful for individuals intervening in conflict, like mediators. These third party communication skills include:

Reframing. Reframing involves giving an alternative interpretation of issues or behaviour. In conflict, parties often engage in communication patterns that escalate a conflict, like trading accusations, or not listening to the other side. By reframing, the mediator validates the speaker's experience but opens the door for alternative interpretations of the content. Changing the frame makes room for different perceptions and interpretations of issues and behaviour. For example, a mediator might reframe an action like "forming coalitions against me" to "she must really feel powerless if she finds it necessary to gather the support of others." Reframing might involve moving a speaker from more general to specific comments, might identify underlying feelings, might neutralise attacks or identify areas of common interests (MCS, 1995, p.157).

▲ Conflict breaks up families, destroys lives and devastates people's homes.
Photo: Reina Neufeldt/CRS

Restating. This is similar to reframing, except it involves restating what one party says in language that is less accusatory. The person restating does not add anything to the statement, but simply paraphrases the speaker. For example, one party might claim "she is lazy. She never helps me with the difficult tasks of running an organisation." A mediator might rephrase this statement in the mediation: "Running an organisation is difficult and takes a lot of work." A follow-up question that reframes the content might be whether the speaker feels overwhelmed with the amount of work involved in running an organisation. When restating, the third party should check with the speaker to make sure the paraphrase is accurate.

Active listening. Using active listening demonstrates to the speaker that you, as a listener, are really hearing what the speaker is saying. You communicate this by *reflecting* the feelings of the listener (responding "you feel very strongly about this" to a comment about "I've had enough – I want him out of the organisation"), restating the content of the speaker's comments, asking open-ended questions, and generally communicating empathy with the speaker. Empathy communicates that the listener really understands the speaker's point of view. When overused, active listening can be irritating, and it is difficult to do in cross-cultural situations where perceptions and interpretations of content and underlying emotions in conversation are culturally influenced.

Other techniques that mediators use include the *caucus* (holding a separate session with each party), or asking parties to redirect comments to the mediator instead of to each other. These two related techniques are appropriate in instances where one party refuses to allow the other party to tell his or her story, often continuously interrupting or accusing the other party.

Redirecting comments to the mediator allows the mediator to take charge of the direction of the communication. However, one of the purposes of mediation is to model good communication and encourage communication between the parties, so this particular technique should be used sparingly.

Reality testing is a technique mediators may use toward the end of a mediation session. The mediator plays the role of an agent of reality by asking questions about the acceptability of the agreement, and the likelihood that all parties will be able to live up to their side of the agreement. In this way they test the agreement to see if it will last after the parties leave the mediation.

Like peacebuilding, mediation is not only a science in terms of its stages and its skills and techniques, but is also an art. Mediators often intuitively respond, using various skills in their repertoire to assist parties in communicating and in reaching an agreement. Knowing how to respond in difficult situations and to cultural differences only comes with practice. Although some individuals are natural mediators, it generally takes a lot of practice to be a good mediator.