

Lesson 2.4A

Responding to Conflict: Nonverbal Communication



Rationale

Research indicates that about 80 percent of our communication is nonverbal. Being able to communicate effectively means understanding verbal and nonverbal interactions. In this activity, participants experience what it is like to interact without words to understand the complexity of communication.

Objectives

1. To develop an awareness of how people communicate without words.
2. To develop nonverbal communication skills.
3. To understand the role of nonverbal communication during conflict.

Standards

- ◆ Culture

Time: One class period (45 minutes)

Materials

- *When No Means Yes* Handout



45 minutes

Procedures

I. Essential Questions:

1. How can we communicate without words?
2. Why is nonverbal communication important when responding to conflict?

II. Motivation/Introduction (2 minutes)

Review the conflict management concepts introduced in the lessons in Section 2 that you have used to date, including conflict analysis (2.1, 2.3), conflict styles (2.2), the value of trust (Cross the Line, 2.3), the value of working cooperatively rather than competitively (Cross the Line, 2.3). Tell students that managing conflict whether at the personal or international level depends on building and maintaining trust, working cooperatively, and building relationships. One of the ways to build relationships is by communicating effectively. Tell students that they are going to focus on developing communication skills.

III. Teacher Directed/Guided Practice (15 minutes)

1. Explain to students that they will study nonverbal communication—ways that people communicate without using words. They will begin by arranging themselves in a line according to the month and day (not year) of their birth. But, they will do this **WITHOUT** talking, writing, or using any props. In other words, students must find another way to communicate. The exercise must be done with the month followed by the day; it will not work if they arrange themselves by day, then month. The teacher may start the exercise by indicating which end of the classroom is January 1 and which is December 31.
2. Give students a moment to think of a strategy to use, and then tell them to begin. From the moment you say “start,” the class should be completely silent.
3. When the group believes it has accomplished the task, check how well they did by having each student in line state their birth month and day starting with the person closest to January 1 (at the start of the line). Students who are in the incorrect place should find their correct place in the line. Once they are in the correct order, have them sit in this order for remainder of class.
4. Debrief this exercise with the following questions:
 - ◆ How did you find your place in line?
 - ◆ Was it difficult? Why or why not?
 - ◆ What strategies did you use? How well do you think they worked? Why or why not?
 - ◆ What did you do when you tried to communicate with someone who was using a different system of communication? Share with students the importance of finding a common language, especially when trying to manage conflicts.
 - ◆ Have any of you ever had an experience when you tried to communicate with someone, but were misunderstood because of a language barrier? How did you respond?
 - ◆ Why is it important to be aware of how you communicate nonverbally? How can it be helpful to pay attention to how others communicate nonverbally when in a conflict situation?

Note: Paying attention to your own nonverbal communication can help ensure that you project openness to the person with whom you are in conflict. Noting the nonverbal communication of others can help you identify when someone feels uncomfortable and may lead you to adjust how you interact with them so they feel more secure.

IV. Teacher Directed (9 minutes)

1. Tell students that they are going to read an example of miscommunication over gestures. The story is about a Peace Corps volunteer in Slovakia who had difficulty with nonverbal communication.
2. Have students locate Slovakia on a map and identify the countries that border it. Ask them what they know about the country/region from history, e.g., WWI and WWII.
3. Divide students into groups of three or four and distribute the *When No Means Yes* Handout to each student.

V. Independent Practice (15 minutes)

1. Have students read the story and answer the questions at the bottom of the handout in their groups.
2. Have groups share their responses.

VI. Discussion (4 minutes)

Lead a discussion using some or all of the following questions:

- ◆ How can nonverbal communication impact negotiations where parties are from different cultures or countries?
- ◆ How could a peacebuilder prepare him/herself to use nonverbal communication for a negotiation?

Extension Activity

Have students create a Top Ten Ways to Communicate Nonverbally poster or a radio advertisement that promotes and explains the importance of nonverbal communication.

Assessment:

Participation in small group work and large group discussion

Lesson 2.4a Handout: When No Means Yes

It's true that the Peace Corps is the "toughest job you'll ever love," but I had no idea it would be the most confusing. Shortly after arriving at my Peace Corps site in Ruzomberok, Slovakia, I decided to visit another Peace Corps Volunteer in a neighboring town. My Slovak was ok, having had three months of language and cultural training, but I still relied on gestures to get around and hadn't yet learned a lot of slang. I walked into the train station to buy a ticket for the short ride to Liptovsky Hradok. To buy my ticket, I told the ticket seller where I was going and held up one finger, my forefinger, to indicate that I wanted one ticket. I was very confused when he gave me two. I shook my head to suggest there was a mistake and gave one back. I didn't realize that in Slovakia you hold up your thumb to suggest one. Holding up your thumb and forefinger means "two." When I showed my forefinger, he assumed I wanted two tickets. Over the course of the next two years, I would mistakenly end up with two movie tickets, two bus tickets, and two train tickets on countless occasions. Old habits die hard.

After I bought my train ticket, I walked out to the platform. I heard some muffled noises from the loud speaker that I could not understand and hoped the announcement wasn't anything important. A train arrived a few minutes later, and I followed the crowd toward it. Before I got on, I asked a woman, "Liptovsky Hradok?" hoping my intonation would explain what I meant. She nodded and said, "*No*." I stepped back and let others board, returning to the platform to wait for my train. Another train came from the opposite direction and I approached it. Again, I asked someone, "Liptovksy Hradok?" This time the response was *Nie*. Now I was confused. *Nie* means "no" in Slovak, but why had the first woman said "no"? I went into the train station to look at the train schedule. My train had come and gone. I waited for the next train to Liptovsky Hradok, got on it, and hoped it would take me where I wanted to go. When I finally reached my friend's apartment, I told him what had happened. He said that he had recently learned *no* is the quick way of saying *Ano* (ah-no), which means yes. I thought back to when the woman said no, meaning yes, to me at the first train. She had smiled and nodded, but I had ignored those gestures because the word sounded so familiar to me. But when I relied on gestures like my forefinger to indicate one ticket, that had resulted in confusion, as well. Some things made sense to me, others did not. I wondered if I would ever be able to feel at home in a place where everything seemed upside down.

Note: Words in italics are in Slovak.

Answer the following questions in your groups.

1. What are the sources of the writer's confusion?
2. What gestures does she assume are universal?
3. What would you do in her situation to try to manage the challenges to nonverbal and verbal communication?
4. How can managing these challenges help prevent conflict?

Biography: Alison Milofsky is a senior program officer at the United States Institute of Peace, where she facilitates workshops on communication and negotiation skills. She continues to feel at home in Slovakia, 15 years after leaving the Peace Corps. She visits Ruzomberok every summer with her Slovak husband, whom she met there, and her two children, who speak Slovak and English. She speaks Slovak with her in-laws, but she still occasionally makes the forefinger-equals-one mistake.