Skills for Conflict Resolution for Youth Leaders

Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi
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Acknowledgments

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Manjrika Sewak
Skills for Conflict Resolution

WISCOMP staff members Seema Kakran and Manjri Sewak conducted a workshop on Conflict Resolution Skills for students of the Shining Network at Kamla Nehru College, New Delhi.

The workshop opened with an introduction to two dialogue case studies that represented examples of successful peacebuilding. These were:

- A dialogue between second generation Germans (whose parents were involved with the Third Reich in Nazi Germany) and American Jews (whose parents/family were victims/survivors of the Holocaust).
- A dialogue between Arab and Israeli high school students on the Middle East conflict.

Short films (Journey to Understanding and The Enemy Has a Face) demonstrating the methods and accomplishments of the two dialogues were screened, following which the facilitators invited participants into a discussion on the learnings for conflict resolution practice. Many issues and insights were articulated in this context, for instance:

- The motivation/desire to understand a view different from the participants’ own perspective;
- Willingness to listen to ‘the other’s’ story;
- Mutual acceptance and respect for the adversary;
- Stepping into the ‘shoes of the other’;
- Courage to take the first step for conciliation;
- The importance of a supportive environment and a neutral and safe space;
- The correlation between getting to know your adversary, seeking to understand his/her story, and the cultivation of empathy;
- The need to address and respond to trauma (which any act of violence generates). Students also pointed to the trauma generated by the
death of family members, which may not be linked to conflict/violence, but which needs to be addressed nonetheless.

- The centrality of relationships: The workshop facilitators elaborated on the centrality of human relationships in many faith/spiritual traditions. Conflict fractures relationships and thus any effort to build peace must focus on rebuilding these relationships.

The workshop facilitators then shared a working definition of conflict resolution as a process which:

- Involves nonviolent methods (such as dialogue, negotiation, and mediation) that seek to resolve conflicts (both violent and nonviolent) and,

Seeks to change knowledge (through an understanding of the other’s needs), attitudes (from hostility and prejudice to respect and hope), and behaviour (from exclusion, aggression, discrimination or violence to nonviolence, inclusion, friendship). Conflict resolution happens when deeply-held beliefs and perceptions about the ‘adversary’ are changed in positive terms.
Conflict resolution is specific to culture and context. In other words, what works in one region will not work in the other. A conflict resolution process should initiate the following:

- The presence of a feeling of well-being (food, shelter, livelihood, friendships, dignity).
- A feeling of happiness with who we are and with the way we live.
- A situation where equality and respect exist for all, irrespective of our sex, religion, class, caste, or ethnicity.
- People’s faith in the rule of law: a belief that if any kind of wrong is committed against an individual, s/he has the right to appeal to an administrative/legal authority. There should be acknowledgement that a wrong was committed; an attempt should be made to right the wrong (make amends); and a commitment that it will not be repeated again (justice).

Drawing on the work of John Paul Lederach, the facilitators then drew the participants’ attention to the different levels at which conflict resolution should take place:

- Personal change: new attitudes, behaviours, and knowledge (for instance, coexistence programmes, school-level interventions such as teacher and student exchanges), preference for nonviolence.
- Relational change: new or improved relationships between hostile groups/nations (dialogue programmes).
- Cultural change: cultural values that support the rights of all (gender-based prejudices).
- Structural change: equitable institutions, policies, and a new generation of leaders.

Following this, participants discussed a diverse range of issues that should be addressed by a conflict resolution process. These were:

- Information: parties often have insufficient information about the other sides’ goals and behaviour. Collecting and clarifying facts can go a long way in easing tensions.
• Listening (through frequent meetings): Through the information gained, stakeholders may come to the conclusion that they had misread the others’ intentions and actions. So, greater contact and exchange of information could solve the conflict.

• Equitable distribution of resources: land, money, oil, water, electricity etc.

• Relationships: build trust, address the past.

• Structures: institutions, laws, systems determine who has access to power and resources and who makes decisions.

• Values: these are formed by life experiences and our faith traditions. A challenge to our values could lead to conflict.

• Basic human needs: food, water, shelter, dignity/respect, a secure identity (religious, ethnic, cultural, caste etc.), recognition in the family/community, participation in social/political life, a sense of purpose, sense of belonging, et al.

• Relative deprivation: How do we address the needs of all stakeholders, and not just our own needs? In a conflict situation, the why question is important (whether the person is a mediator or a party to the conflict). If individuals articulate their own needs, it becomes easier to solve problems since they are able to move beyond positions (I want this…) to needs (why I want it…).

• Trauma: the hurt and pain that we carry from our past (the personal and collective experience of violence and loss) must be addressed by a conflict resolution process.

The facilitators then focused on one method of conflict resolution—dialogue. Although the two films had offered several insights on the ingredients that make for a successful dialogue process, the discussion sought to take these learnings further and highlight some of the prerequisites and key characteristics in this respect:

• Dialogue is not any kind of communication between disputing parties. In conflict resolution terminology, it refers to a specific technique.
Dialogue is different from negotiation. The hoped-for product of negotiation is a concrete agreement, while the aim of a dialogue is a changed relationship. In a negotiation, stakeholders try to define and satisfy material interests through jointly-reached agreements. The outcome of a dialogue is to build human capacities to solve problems, to change relationships towards trust. Dialogue is often a precursor to negotiation. It prepares the ground for problem-solving.

The purpose of a dialogue process is to deepen the participants’ understanding of each other; to discover common concerns; and to create tangible shifts in their perceptions of each other.

- A dialogue process seeks to reduce anger, foster trust, and build an environment where participants want to fix the problem. With an improved relationship, they have a better chance at a successful negotiation.

- The focus is on agreements that recognize the core identity needs of all stakeholders (for example, the right of Palestinians to live in their homeland and a similar right for the Israelis to have their own state).

- In a dialogue process, participants should list their own needs and those of the other side. They should work towards a genuine understanding of each other’s perspectives. Most significantly, they must endure when the conversations get difficult. And, they must be open to changing their view based on what they hear in the dialogue.

Dialogue is a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn. Each makes a serious effort to take into account the other’s concerns, even when disagreement persists. No participant gives up her or his identity, but each recognizes enough of the other’s valid claims that he or she will act differently toward the other.

Harold Saunders
Founder
International Institute for Sustained Dialogue, Washington DC
Several references were made to M. K. Gandhi who the facilitators saw as a foremost practitioner of dialogue. Referring to a quote by Gandhi, which he penned down in a letter to the Viceroy Lord Irwin (on the eve of the civil disobedience movement), the facilitators said this was a good example of dialogue-in-practice: ‘I respectfully invite you to partake in a real conference among equals, interested only in promoting the common good of mankind through voluntary fellowship and in arranging terms of mutual help suited to both.’ Attention was drawn to Gandhi’s consistent practice of separating the ‘character’ of the adversary from the ‘content’ of the conflict. As a result, Gandhi was able to avoid judgmental communication, even while getting his message across to the adversary.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the facilitators shared with the participants a hand-out on active listening. Owing to the paucity of time, they were unable to discuss this in detail. However, some of the insights on active listening were discussed in the evaluation session.

The evaluation session revealed that the students had found the workshop to be useful in addressing conflicts that they experience at
different levels (within the family, with friends, and with their teachers in the college). Greater awareness of political/social conflicts (such as those in the Middle East and those based on class and race) was also recorded.

Students showed greater sensitivity to the importance of language in conflict communication. As one student put it, ‘I learnt not to speak in the heat of the moment’; while another said, ‘I learnt to listen to the other’s point of view before judging the person or the situation’. There was unanimity in the group with respect to the importance of practicing patience, non-judgmental listening (particularly towards those with whom they have the greatest disagreements), and not engaging in side conversations or interrupting the other when s/her is speaking.

One participant also expressed the view that ‘taking initiative to reach out to “the other” was not a sign of weakness’. This was an important learning from the workshop. Another participant said that she will ‘now not jump to conclusions’ when she is annoyed.

Some observations reflected greater sensitivity to negative stereotypes and to the discrimination that students saw on a daily basis, but which they hitherto chose to ignore. Linked to this was also an increase in their motivation to understand, analyse, and educate themselves about the inequalities and conflicts they saw in their families and communities. Some students also expressed greater comfort with living in spaces of grey and states of doubt. For instance, one student said: ‘I learnt that you don’t need a solid answer or resolution to all problems. What is important is that you understand “the other”’. Another added: ‘I will not force my family or friends to change their views to think like me. It’s okay to think differently!’
Workshop Programme

Skills for Conflict Resolution for Youth Leaders
October 30, 2013
Venue: Kamala Nehru College, New Delhi

2:00 p.m. – 2:10 p.m. Welcome and Introductions

2:10 p.m. – 2:45 p.m. Film Screening and Discussion
Journey to Understanding and Seeds of Peace

2:45 p.m. – 3:10 p.m. Skills for Conflict Resolution?

3:10 p.m. – 3:20 p.m. Break

3:30 p.m. – 4:10 p.m. Active Listening

4:10 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. Q and A
Facilitator Profiles

Seema Kakran (New Delhi) is Deputy Director at Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP), an initiative of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. She has been coordinating WISCOMP’s Education for Peace workshops since 2008. Kakran holds an M.Phil degree in Political Science from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi and a Masters’ degree in Political Science from the University of Delhi. Prior to joining WISCOMP, she taught Political Science at colleges in Delhi University and at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA.

Manjrika Sewak (New Delhi) is Assistant Director at WISCOMP where she works on issues of conflict transformation and education for peace. A Fulbright Conflict Resolution Scholar, she holds a Masters’ degree in Conflict Transformation from the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding, Easter Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, USA and a Bachelors’ degree in Journalism Honours from Lady Shri Ram College for Women, New Delhi. A trainer in the field of peacebuilding, Sewak has designed curriculum and conducted workshops on various aspects of dialogue, nonviolence, and conflict transformation. She is also a member of the Visiting Faculty for the Peacebuilding Diploma Programme at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, New Delhi.
List of Participants

Workshop participants represented the Shining Network Society of Kamla Nehru College (University of Delhi), New Delhi. They were pursuing Bachelor’s degrees in different Departments of the College.

**Arts Department**
Dithsala Anar
Ronica Vungmuankim

**Economics Department**
Raveesha Gupta
Smriti Joinwal
Subhashree Panda
Tinnish Sharma

**Mathematics Department**
Hansa Mehra
Karishma Wadera
Priyanka
Shaily Chauhan

**Philosophy Department**
Simran Pathak

**Psychology Department**
Anurada Nautiyal
Aarohi Mehra
Deblina Das
Meenakshi Khosla
Shikha Soni
Shireen Dossa

**Sociology Department**
Arantxa Talukdar
Pallavi Gill