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# Teaching the Difference between Compromise and Collaboration through Trial and Error

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**Courses:** *Conflict Management, Interpersonal Communication, Organizational Communication, Small Group Communication*
**Objectives:** *Students will distinguish between collaboration and compromise. Students will also engage in group processes and make decisions using compromising and collaborating strategies*

### Introduction and Rationale

Students often do not understand the difference between collaboration and compromise. Collaboration, also known as problem solving, an integrative solution, or a win-win solution is, "a strategy that involves seeking a mutually satisfactory alternative" (Pruitt & Kim, 2004, p. 297). Compromise, in contrast, is "an obvious alternative that stands partway between the disputants' preferred positions" (p. 294) and, thus, is a lose-lose solution because neither disputant gains their desired outcome. Students may see compromise as an appropriate way to handle conflict because it may seem to be the safest problem-solution approach for maintaining relationships, easiest to work toward, least argumentative, and quickest to execute. In contrast, collaboration requires that participants brainstorm, problem solve constructively, and "think outside the box" during the deliberations necessary to pursue their goals successfully. By learning the difference between collaboration and compromise experientially through this ungraded in-class activity, students potentially gain the tools to achieve win-win results in their efforts to resolve conflicts and decision-making situations. Collaboration allows a person to navigate the innumerable voices, opinions, and options that are often a part of decision making.

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**The Activity**

Part One: The instructor asks each student to identify three terms that are most important to associate with leadership (e.g., visionary, intelligent, determined) and three terms most important to associate with teamwork (e.g., hardworking, flexible, loyal). Leadership and teamwork can then be the focus of the decision-making process. Temporarily setting aside "teamwork" and its associated terms until the third part of the activity, the instructor writes the word "leadership" on the board.

The instructor then places the students into groups comprised of three or four members each. Based on the individual student lists, each group must then agree on three terms that are the most important to associate with leadership. A representative from each group writes their three terms on the board, even if they overlap with another group's terms. Once all sets of terms are on the board, the class, as a whole again, must narrow the choices to three terms that are most important to associate with leadership. The instructor limits the time to complete this task to no more than five minutes. Typically, one student usually volunteers to go to the board to erase undesirable terms. The instructor does not prescribe this procedure, however, and students are allowed to choose how they want to proceed. Inevitably, repeated terms and synonyms are the first terms removed. Students then struggle to limit themselves to three terms but usually do so efficiently by listening to the most vocal students in the class and by rejecting ideas that seem to take too much time (e.g., let's go around the room and ask each student). Students quickly decide three terms and are proud if they do so within the five-minute time constraint.

The instructor then debriefs with the class by asking questions about why the three terms were chosen, how decisions were made, what role denotation and connotation played in decision making, and whether the time limit affected the outcome. Doing so encourages students to evaluate the quality of the terms on the board. During this process, the instructor might ask, for instance, how effective it is to use a broad term (e.g., management) that seems to be just as general as the term (e.g., leadership) they are trying to define.

After some discussion, the instructor then asks the class how satisfied they are with the terms they identified. By hand-count, students indicate how many people are entirely satisfied with the terms. Typically, only a handful of people raise their hands and, usually, this group consists of the students who were the most vocal or who wielded the power to erase the terms on the board. In this way, students meet two of the three requirements for this portion of the activity: (1) keep only three terms on the board, (2) be finished within five minutes, and (3) decide terms the class agrees are most important to associate with leadership. If pressed, some students will admit disappointment over the terms and frustration over the process. Essentially, students realize the limits of compromising and are ready to learn more about collaborating.

Part Two: In this portion of the lesson, the instructor provides lecture notes for students. These notes may include definitions for collaboration and compromise, the difference between win-win and lose-lose outcomes, and the five specific strategies for

collaboration: expanding the pie, nonspecific compensation, cost cutting, logrolling, and bridging (Pruit & Kim, 2004).

The instructor begins by asking students why they chose to compromise rather than collaborate. Students mention factors including the time limit, a desire to avoid a perceived argument, a willingness to give in to more vocal students, a focus on quantity over quality, and an indifference resulting from a lack of investment. During this discussion, students mention problems that arose such as when students felt their voice was silenced or when they were uncomfortable participating because they felt they were not part of the process. The instructor then applies this to a business or friend context, discusses the benefits of brainstorming and the synergy created from full participation of all group members, and encourages students to be independent and vocal. Finally, the instructor discusses specific collaboration techniques and the benefits of them. For example:

1. Focused discussion toward a goal. This may be accomplished if one or more group members:

- Determine the most important goals for the group.
- Keep discussion moving by limiting extraneous conversation.
- Are practical/realistic when making contributions to discussion.
- Keep interest of group members by recruiting participation from those less vocal.
- Are willing to take charge of the collaboration process.
- Are willing to let someone else take charge.
- Create rules to guide collaboration (e.g., one person speaks at a time).
- Follow/enforce rules.

2. Ensuring all options have been considered. This may be accomplished if one or more group members:

- Explain/justify preferences for specific ideas rather than merely state them.
- Recruit advocates for the available options.
- Require others to explain non-specific justifications (e.g., I just like that one).
- Play devil's advocate before eliminating an option.
- Allow silence so that those less vocal can have the opportunity to contribute.
- Keep all group members involved.
- Avoid relying heavily on supposed democratic processes (Deetz, 2005). For example, decisions made by majority rule may bypass more valid but less popular options.
- Consider options that are more unusual or "outside of the box."
- Consider even obvious options.
- Consider unlikely or "wishful thinking" options.

Part Three: The instructor challenges students to try the activity again, this time using collaboration techniques as they attempt to agree on three terms to define

teamwork. Students write their individual terms on the board and the class together determines which three terms should stay because they are most important to associate with teamwork. Students are once again given only five minutes to reach agreement on the three terms. After five minutes, students are asked how satisfied they are with the terms and students provide feedback on the collaboration process including its pros (e.g., more thoughtful ideas) and cons (e.g., time consuming).

   The instructor then asks what techniques students used to collaborate and they seek a more representative sample of ideas from their peers. Students are less reluctant to reject ideas and terms outright. Students look for more legitimate reasons on which consensus can be built to reject or keep terms. Students are more interested in being satisfied with the terms than with meeting the arbitrary time constraint and arbitrary number of terms. As a result of this shift, students discuss what the words mean and their own connotations related to the terms on the board. The process becomes more reflective and, consequently, every decision takes longer to make.

   Students begin to look "outside the box" to keep group members satisfied and, yet, stay true to the requirements for the activity. For example, students may use slashes so that concepts rather than words are represented (e.g., community/ loyalty) or decide to keep only two terms with considerable agreement rather than rush to decide three terms with little agreement. Although in both of these cases students violate one of the original rules (i.e., only three terms), they do so in a way that fosters collaboration and quality rather than, as accomplished in Part One, blind adherence to quantity (i.e., three terms in five minutes). Students begin to look beyond the basic requirements of the activity to achieve a win-win outcome, collaborating to achieve satisfactory terms.

## Debriefing

During debriefing, this time students discover a dramatic increase in satisfaction about the outcome. Usually, more than twice as many students raise their hands when asked if they are satisfied with the three terms and the process of deliberating to achieve consensus.

## Appraisal

Through this activity, students experientially learn the value of and hard work involved in collaboration. Once aware of the deceptive ease of compromise, students are better able to distinguish between collaboration and compromise. As a result, they are eager to learn specific techniques for collaboration and appreciate the opportunity to practice them. After experiencing this activity, students are better equipped to engage in group processes and make decisions when conflict arises.

   A limitation of this activity is that it is time-consuming. Engaging in the entire three-step process requires 50 minutes of class time to complete. Another limitation

of the activity is that it requires the instructor to remain indifferent to what occurs in the deliberation process. This may be difficult but is necessary for students to own the outcome of the process.

## References and Suggested Readings

Deetz, S. (2005). Critical theory. In S. May & D. K. Mumby (Eds.), *Engaging organizational communication theory and research: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 85–112). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pruit, D. G., & Kim, S. G. (2004). *Social conflict: Escalation, statement, and settlement* (3rd Ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Warnemunde, D. E. (1986). The Status of the introductory small group communication course. *Communication Education, 35,* 389–396.