



Conflict Competence in  
Family, School and Workplace



# SABONA

I see you

## **Conflict and School**

"I see you", "I acknowledge your existence", "I take you in". This is how they say hello in the Zulu culture. Seeing a person, and seeing beyond behaviour is the essence of the concept. Grownups with skills in conflict hygiene give children possibilities to develop their own identity, personality and skills in building relations.

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## **SABONA – Conflict and School**

### **Seeing a person**

From the moment we are conceived we have goals. We want to matter. Wanting things or wanting to do things is what gets us up in the morning. This is what motivates us to develop, learn, reach, love – and all the positive things in life. And we want others to recognize who we are and what we do. We want to be seen. So we do things to be seen, to achieve our goals.

I see you. So what did we see? The effects of embracing children with an understanding of goals and means as different areas in action when there were conflicts, misunderstandings or bad behaviour. An example: “I saw you hitting someone when entering the class room this morning. You know this is not allowed, no one should come to school and be afraid of being hurt by others during the day. But I would like to talk to you about what happened before you hit, and what you wanted to express. It seemed to me that something happened that was very important to you”. When we send messages about both goals and means each time there is trouble, children start to see the difference: Even though he or she did something that was considered “bad behaviour”, the goal behind the action might be good – or legitimate. When encouraging the children every day to express their goals, dreams and wishes became a part of the school culture, the focus in conflicts was changed from stopping and sanctioning violence to finding effective and positive means to reach the goals – and develop creativity to be able to include other people’s goals in the processes/ solutions as well.

What a change of focus! What a wonderful way to meet a child searching for her or his own voice; eager to learn how the world works!

In deep gratitude to the person who put these theories forward in the first place – Professor Johan Galtung – we now invite you to take part in our experience! The Sabona Core Group consists of Vigdis and Lars Thyholdt, Aase Marie and Synove Faldalen, and we focus on the three pillars: Family, School and Workplace.

The rationale behind choosing SABONA as the name for the conflict solution programme was to indicate the underpinning attitudes behind the concept: respect; mutuality; dignity. Although we can all agree that these values are important, it might not be as simple to put them into practice. In the SABONA program we offer a set of tools that are useful in supporting and enhancing these values.

### **Toolkit with user manual**

Our goal has been to choose and put together the smallest package of tools that would be necessary to have a basic knowledge on how to understand, interpret and act proactive in conflicts. What we try to give an answer to are the following questions: What is a conflict? What are the ingredients of a conflict? How does it start? How does it develop? How can it be solved?

We ended up with seven tools in the basic toolkit. The first three give the theoretical foundation we build on, and the next four are recipes on what to do. For quick and easy learning, there is a connection between the number of the tool and the content of that tool. That does not mean that they have to be learnt or applied according to the order they appear in. Like tools in a toolkit you choose what seems to fit with the job at hand.

And yes, it is a job. Knowing how to handle conflicts is not an easy fix that makes the whole problem vanish in “purple skies and flowers”. It is to accept that conflicts have to do with goals, and to find good ways to go about colliding goals, and also what can be done with badly handled conflicts that have left people in pain, anger and maybe hatred.

### **Conflict hygiene**

Developing skills like this is much more than traditional conflict handling. This is to acknowledge goals and means – both the good ones and the bad ones – as a normal part of life, and learn to go about it in a skilled and competent way. When we acquire the knowledge that goals and means are different and

have to be addresses as such, then we are building conflict hygiene into the school culture. Cultures with these traits are able to hold more goals for more people, with more creativity, happiness and health. Or in professor Galtung’s word: “Tell me how you behave in a conflict, and I will tell you how much peace culture you have”.

		Goals	
		-	+
Means	-	Neg Goal Neg Mean	Pos Goal Neg Mean
	+	Neg Goal Pos Mean	Pos Goal Pos Mean

Exercise: Think of something you wanted very much during the last week, and try to visualise what it would mean to you if you got what you wanted. Then try to think about what you did to achieve this important goal. Then you can take it through this model that basically connects us to other people. Whether my goals and means are positive or negative depends on how it affects others. Does it violate other people’s basic needs? Does it go against dignity (as we shall explore later)? This exercise helps us reflect upon the difference/ similarities between goals and means.

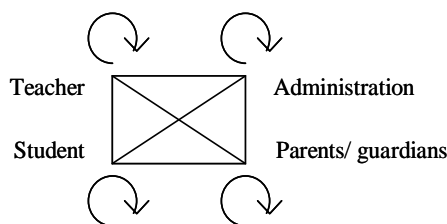
It is very common to confuse goals and means. If a child does something bad – we more or less unconscious think of the child as bad. We usually do not have an automatic response that starts figuring out – was it the goal, the mean or both that was negative? And if there seemed to be a negative goal – what positive goal might hide underneath the negative one? And yet – this is exactly what we will work on in SABONA.

### The school is the unit

When we started SABONA in School autumn 2005, we focused on one class level only, and planned to develop the concept for that level. We soon found that Sabona is very much about attitude – of the grown ups – and the kind of conflict hygiene that develops between teachers and between teacher and the pupils. When the children are met with a “SABONA attitude” from all the grown ups at school – the effect becomes visible. Therefore – it make sense to work with the whole school.

### 4 Parties

All institutions have their own infrastructure, framework and parties. The four parties in the school system are: teachers, children, parents and administration. The four parties might have the same goals, but more often there might be conflicts along these lines. It is important to recognise the different parties’ goals – in order to be able to work constructively with everyone involved. The conflict lines are not necessarily the problem, but how we deal with them, and how good we are at finding creative and constructive solutions. Some examples may clarify the kind of conflicts that arise from the school system: many children competing for the attention of one teacher. Teachers ask parents/ guardians to participate – but might get frustrated when they become too busy. Staff would sometimes like to have a quiet working place – children are not likely to be quiet. The school system put restraints, demands and limitations on a child’s life. Children did not ask for this in the first place. The figure shows the parties in the school, and how they are interrelated. Knowing this will help us reduce/ overcome structural violence, and give ideas on how to plan for positive circles and constructive actions. There are six bilateral – like the ever-present teacher-student relations, and four unilateral, the cycles, within all groups. Ten all together. A school system is more than student-student relations only, and bullying is only a part of that relation. We need holistic thinking taking in the whole system.

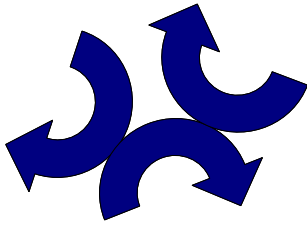


### 3 phases

The venture of introducing SABONA to schools happens in three phases:

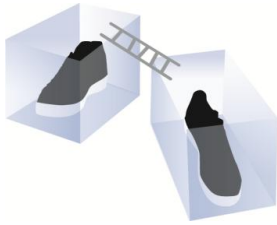
- 1) *Learning* Firstly, teachers/ staff need to gain an understanding of SABONA and make it their own.
- 2) *Teaching* Pupils will acquire knowledge of SABONA as a part of social practice and school norms.
- 3) *Applying* When teachers and students have internalised the conflict tools, it can be applied actively in conflicts that arise in the classroom or at the playground. The knowledge enters as a part of the schools culture – and as a part of everyday language.

# SABONA – an Introduction to the Concepts



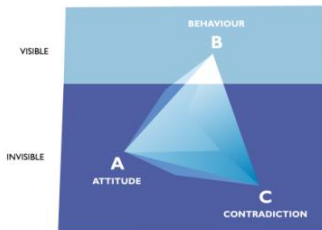
## 1 One definition of conflict - INCOMPATIBILITY

How we think about conflicts decide how we try to solve them. Here we define conflict as incompatible goals and/ or means. This put the goals in focus and not incompatible people, countries, or even the violence that might follow in the path of the conflict. But violence is in it self a conflict between the one party who wishes to hurt the other party, and the other who wishes to stay unharmed.



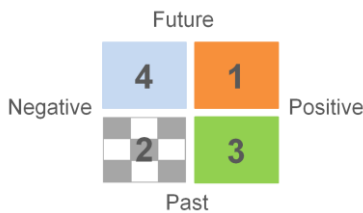
## 2 Two legs to stand tall – the SABONA-PRINCIPLE

Everything that lives has goals. In order to achieve our goals we employ a wide range of means. Goals and means – children need adults to see both. Grownups that are able to distinguish between goals and means, and help children develop empathetic and effective means are vital. Sometimes a positive goal is pursued by negative means. When the grownups acknowledge the positive goal, it is easier to accept the need to find better means to achieve what they want.



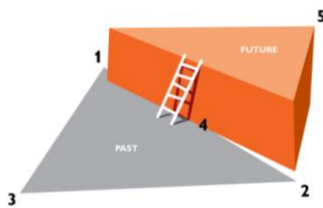
## 3 Three corners of the ABC-TRIANGLE

When goals collide, a contradiction (C) is born. Something has happened *between* people and leads to negative feelings and thoughts *inside* (A – attitude) the involved persons. The body's reaction to blocked goals is to release adrenalin so as to increase strength to be able to overcome the obstruction. A frustrated attitude is followed by action – verbal and nonverbal – and this is what we can see from *outside* (B – behaviour). Conflict = A + B + C.



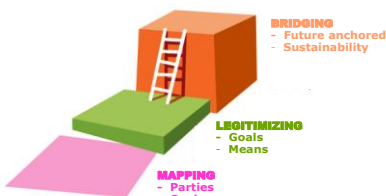
## 4 Four squares on the SORTINGMAT ®

Cross a timeline with the positive/ negative dimension, and what you get is the four squares in the SortingMat. Every square represent a perspective to look at the conflict or challenge at hand. Future, past, positive, negative – the concept is built on basics that can be acknowledged by everyone. The theory behind the SortingMat is a way of conducting a dialogue with conflict parties that has been used and developed over many years. We put it on the floor to walk on.



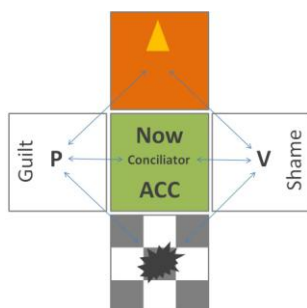
## 5 Five outcomes of conflicts – the 5'ER SCHEME

5'er Scheme helps sort out and analyse the different solutions that are suggested in the process. Position one and two represent winning or losing. Three is withdrawal, and four is all kinds of compromises between the different claims/ goals involved. Five is the outcome where all parties are seen and heard, and where the solution is to create a new reality that can hold the legitimate goals of all the parties.



## 6 3 steps and 2 foci for each step - the TRANSCEND-METHOD

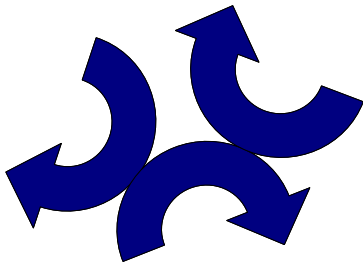
Mapping, legitimising, bridging. The first two steps are based on one-on-one dialogues, doing the bridging process together. Mapping is the process of identifying all the parties involved as well as their different goals. Legitimising is to evaluate means and ends to see if they are okay. When the legitimate goals are found we come together and start bridging a solution anchored in the future.



## 7 5 squares, 1 cross, 1 recipe - the CONCILIATION-CROSS

Misunderstandings or wrong doing have a tendency to knot up the relation between people. Experiences have shown that the following three elements are useful parts of an apology: Acknowledge, Explore, Change. The tool is formed like Red Cross/ Red Crescent – to remember that there are practical hands on steps to take when bad things have happened. The two white fields for V (victim) and P (perpetrator) can be reported from – in a dialogue to explore and learn. The arrows shows how people are tied together, and that it is in everybody's interest to untie the knot.

# 1 One definition of conflict: Incompatibility



- Conflict has to do with incompatibility
- Incompatible goals/ means – not incompatible humans
- When goals collide – a conflict is born
- The arrows illustrate the experience of unsatisfied goals, and remind us that there are usually more than two goals or parties involved in a conflict

## Background

The way we conceive of a concept determines how we think about it. Here conflict is defined as incompatible ends and-or means. The focus is on incompatible ends or goals, and not on incompatible people, countries, nor on the violence that might arise from a conflict. But violence is actually in and by itself a conflict between one party's wish to hurt and harm, and the other party's wish to remain unhurt.

## How we define conflict – decide how we react and what we do

When goals and-or means collide, a conflict is born. Not necessarily because there is anything wrong with any of the parties, but from time to time our goals clash, or whatever we do to achieve them creates problems for others. And we get upset when something or somebody stands in our way. This way of thinking gives us concrete directives for action and solution. The incompatibility becomes the problem, like a puzzle to be solved.

- Goals on a collision course may all be OK
- We have to accept that to have a goal is OK
- We have to accept that others have goals
- And that goals may collide

As violence and conflict are easily confused the idea of "preventing conflict" arises to prevent people from being harmed or hurt. But the net result of this confusion may be that we prevent goals, not necessarily a good idea. Prevent violence is a good idea. And solving conflicts, as a key approach.

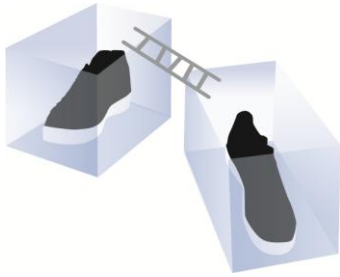
Nobody should say that this is simple. There are reasons for bad reactions in a conflict. Quite often we are dealing with scarce resources, with a feeling of not being appreciated, a feeling of unfairness, of not being understood. Or that somebody else encroaches on something that is rightfully mine.

Emotions are involved – and often a lot of them. Situations loaded with emotions because there is so much at stake call for clarification. Strategies to handle this aspect of life already acquired and internalized would be very useful. It is a little like learning to drive relative to really being in the traffic. Just think of how many collisions there would have been if everybody was just driving at full speed in speedy cars with no idea of how one might, could, should behave!

## Learning objectives

- What we think about conflicts decides how we conceive of and handle conflicts
- To prevent violence, not conflicts – if the latter, we may end up preventing goals instead of searching for creative solutions
- Learn strategies to handle goals that are on a collision course

## 2 Two aspects of the same issue: Means – Ends



- Everything that lives has goals
- Goals and means – Adults need to distinguish the two in children; and in themselves
- Learn which goals are ok to have, and which means are ok to use
- The path of change goes through acknowledging and supporting the goals. It is then easier to accept the need to find better ways of achieving goals.

### Background

Goals and means. It is human nature to *want* something. Being goal focused is embedded in humans as a vital survival instinct. We are focused on self-preservation and activities that provide our basic needs. We consider the following as basic needs:

- Survival (as opposed to death)
- Wellness (as opposed to illness)
- Freedom (as opposed to repression)
- Identity (as opposed to alienation)

These four needs can be summed up in the term 'dignity'. To use dignity as a guideline when being around children – is a good rule of thumb. As goals are closely linked to basic needs – dignity in particular – there is also a close correlation between basic needs, strong emotions and high motivation.

If you scrape the surface of the goals that different children have, you find many similarities. It is about being seen, acceptance, justice, safety and an experience of being valued. However, the means they employ are very varied. A child with a narrow and negative repertory is vulnerable in school as he/ she can be perceived as more challenging and demanding by teachers and pupils alike.

The various ways a child express their will is partly dependent on heritage, but largely because of the environment in which they grow up. At home, and when socialising with persons the child perceives significant, the child observes and learns what pays off, and what adults do to get it their way. They also learn what is OK to want, what isn't, and what is out of their reach.

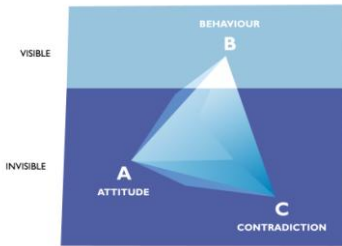
It is easier for children to accept when they make a mistake, if they also receive encouragement when they get it right, when they do something positive. The path of change goes through:

- Saying clearly when behaviour is unacceptable.
- At the same time find/ clarify and support legitimate goals
- Communicating confidence and belief to the child that they can develop better means

### Learning Objectives

- Separate goals from means
- There are both good and poor goals
- There are both good and poor means
- Be able to express own needs
- Practice good ways of expressing and achieving own goals

### 3 Three corners of the ABC Triangle



- When goals collide, a conflict is born
- Something has happened *between* people
- This can lead to negative feelings and thoughts *inside* people
- Frustrated attitudes may lead to violent behaviour – on the *outside*.
- All three must be dealt with to resolve the conflict.
- The goals are in A, the means in B, the contradictions in C.

#### Background

When my goal collides with other peoples', a contradiction arises between me and my goal - and the 'opponents' and their goal. It is therefore vital to explore which goals collide, or are incompatible, and what needs to be done for these goals to be achieved. Though the action is easy to see, the objective might not be. We usually treat the reaction – “the smoke” so to speak - as if it was the fire.

The conflict may turn very personal if we do not separate the goals from the confrontation that arise due to their incompatibility. A negative perception of the other persons might occur when what they want or do obstruct me in achieving my goals.

A conflict has three sides, and all three needs to be taken into account in order to resolve and reshape the conflict. Although 'A' comes first in the alphabet but for the following outline, we will make a small alteration:

- C – Contradiction: Something has happened *between* the parties.
- A – Attitude: collision of goals leads to frustration and negative thoughts and feelings - *inside*.
- B – Behaviour: Negative thoughts and feelings often lead to negative actions – *outside*.

The ABC triangle creates a basic understanding of conflict, and creates a foundation so as to consider the various options available when a conflict arises.

**C orientation** – has a focus on the relational; what happens *between* the parties. Where did the goals become at odds? Which goals were hindered? How do we bridge the gap between the various goals? Or – creating a new future together?

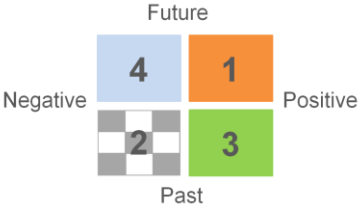
**A orientation** – has a focus on the psychological; what happens *inside* each of the parties. What are they thinking and feeling? What is the connection between what happened now and previous experiences? How can they be strengthened to handle this and similar situations?

**B orientation** – has a focus on the reactions; behaviour is seen from the *outside*. Who has hurt whom? How can we hinder negative behaviour? How can we stop bullying? How can we teach children better ways of behaving? How can we prevent violence? Will punishment create a better pattern of response? How can we teach them positive and constructive means?

#### Learning Objectives

- Look at A, B and C as elements/ different perspectives to understand the conflict
- Clashing of goals is at the heart of the conflict
- Attitudes and behaviour are reactions to the contradiction
- Understand that a legitimate goal can be hiding under illegitimate means/ behaviour
- Learn to reveal our own good goals in situations where we have employed poor means

## 4 Four fields in the SortingMat ®

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Has every parties reality as a starting point</li><li>• Allows each person space to see their own goals – as well as the common goals</li><li>• Creates a useful way of thinking that encourages reflection</li><li>• Creates a strong feeling of being acknowledged</li></ul>
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### Background

The SortingMat is based on two dimensions: past – future, and positive – negative. Something has clearly happened in the past, and there will be a tomorrow – how would we like that to be? Some of our experiences are nice, and others are unpleasant. When we cross these two dimensions, the four squares of the SortingMat appear.

The concept was named SortingMat because it gives a good opportunity to sort out your own thoughts, feelings and perceptions when having the possibility of being in one square at the time. When I think about my own goals it is ok to be selfish. When the negative that happened is in focus, it is *my* experiences that count. When we are looking for happy memories and for the last square when we are asked to find possible problems connected to our goals, dreams and visions, then we open up for other parties as well. The SortingMat creates a sense of responsibility because everybody is given a chance to process and reflect on their own situation. Each round on the mat increases the understanding of the other side. This produces a sense of ownership to a solution and a motivation to carry out what has been agreed to do.

The SortingMat is used in the mapping dialogues. In one-on-one dialogues with the teacher/ conflict worker each and every party has a chance to explore their feelings, thoughts and experiences in different frames. Respect is basic in the situation, and the problems are shared with, but not overtaken by the dialogue partner. Focus is on developing a future that can hold all the legitimate goals. The rules of the SortingMat create predictability that facilitates the process.

#### Square 1: Future positive

What would have been a good solution of the problem the way you look at it? How do you want a good friend to behave? This is where we start because we want to anchor the solution in the future, in the energy field of goals, dreams, and visions. We start here to keep the focus on the future.

#### Square 2: Past negative

Listen with empathy to what every party has experienced, thought and felt during, around and after the conflict came into the open. It is useful to release the pressure. When we have listened for some time, we point out that square 2 is not a place to hang on to, lest we want to walk backwards into the future.

#### Square 3: Past positive

Another field of energy. This time the focus is on whatever has been positive in the past about the person(s) with whom we presently are in conflict. Did they do something you really appreciated? Get some humorous episode, something that made you happy! The purpose is to increase the motivation to rebuild, or create, such relations – to get some ideas on what it could look like.

#### Square 4: Future negative

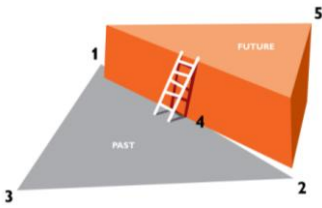
Choices made - and equally so choices not made - have impact on the future. When the focus is in this square the purpose is to elicit awareness of possible negative consequences of the solutions that have emerged. Encourage concreteness. Challenge them to understand deeply the situation of others.

### Learning Objectives

- Somebody cares about what matters to me
- Two truths at the same time: I feel strongly - I think clearly.
- Train to have all four perspectives in one mind - and you are more prepared to help solve conflicts
- If the situation permits me safely to empty myself of negative feelings, then I can handle conflicts better



## 5 Five conflict outcomes in The 5'er Scheme



- Any conflict has at least five different types of outcomes some of which may be solutions - acceptable to the parties and sustainable
- The line from (1) to (2) is the war diagonal - asymmetric!
- The line (3)-(4)-(5) is the peace diagonal - symmetric!
- A good solution can be a combination of solutions like (3)+(4)+(5)

### Background

Conflicts are handled in many ways, and the method we use matters for the acceptability and sustainability of the solution. Societies have developed many ways of handling conflicts, like the court system, mediation councils, family counseling. Even war is used in efforts to solve conflicts. The method we use is "conflict solution through dialogue", and dialogue means in this context empathy - nonviolence - creativity. The 5'er scheme maps different types of outcomes. Clearly, outcomes on the peace diagonal will be more sustainable than outcomes on the war diagonal.

### Type 1 and 2 outcomes

These are outcomes with winners and losers. Like one is found right and the other wrong. There may be situations where this is true - like cases of exploitation: slave versus slave-owner, repression and other ways of insulting basic needs. But most conflicts involve parties where all of them have some kind of valid point, and an either-or solution is experienced as unjust. If it is nevertheless chosen, then the seeds of the next conflict become a part of the outcome.

### Type 3 outcome

We are talking about withdrawal - temporarily or permanently. A neither-nor solution. A zero solution. Sometimes a solution of that kind comes out of cowardice, sometimes because the parties do not feel the goals are worth that much trouble, and sometimes it is simply a wise decision: we'll return to the issue, making sure that no party is forgotten.

### Type 4 outcome

All types of compromise. Some parties may get more than the others, or they may share equally. They all give something and receive something. Hopefully they become equally satisfied - or dissatisfied.

### Type 5 outcome

This is the result of a real dialogue, not only a debate, to identify the underlying goals in order to anchor the solution in a future based on the legitimate goals of all parties. Relations are nurtured, and creativity blossoms!

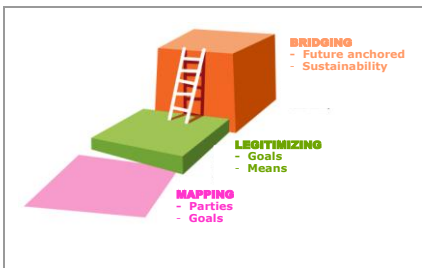
### 5'er detectives

Identifying good 5'er solutions is a way of developing human relation competence and creativity. A 5'er detective knows the 5'er concept, and knows the steps toward a 5'er solution. There is safety in knowing that something can be done when disagreement and other conflicts arise. 5'er detectives in higher grades at school can be helpful when conflicts arise at lower grades, among the youngest. And - not to be disregarded: parents and others in the inner circles may also have something to learn from 5'er detectives!

### Learning Objectives

- All conflicts have at least 5 different outcomes
- The war diagonal connects points (1) and (2) - asymmetric!
- The peace diagonal goes along (3) - (4) and (5) - symmetric!
- To get from the war diagonal to the peace diagonal all parties must be seen and heard
- A 5'er detective can tell about the 5 different outcomes of conflict
- A 5'er detective knows why 5'er solutions are more likely to be good, acceptable and sustainable
- A 5'er detective knows how to identify 5'er solutions

## 6 Six: 3 steps with 2 foci each on the Solution Ladder (The TRANSCEND method)



- Separate the parties to avoid violence – then:
- Mapping, all parties and all their goals (one party at the time)
- Legitimizing, check if the goals and means are ok (one party at the time)
- Bridging, find the future that can accommodate all the parties legitimate goals (together)

### Background

The Solution Ladder is both a practical tool for solving conflicts, and a framework or script for thinking that will enhance children's competence in building relations. As a tool it can be used by the grownups even before the students have learnt the concept. Gradually, as the children gain knowledge and experience with the model, they will themselves start thinking along these lines when a conflict arises. An important objective for this work is that the children will be able to handle conflicts on their own. The ladder is to remind us that the last phase may be very challenging...!

### Mapping

Who are the parties, and what are their objectives? In traditional conflict handling one usually concentrate on two parties. Experience has proved over and over again that this is rarely the case. It is difficult to solve a problem if some of the parties are left out. But what is the underlying goal for each and every party? What does the class look like that you would like to be a part of? How would you like your walk to school to be like? What would you like your relationship to the teachers to look like? What do you want to achieve by hitting someone that is smaller than you? Through the process of mapping parties and goals a picture of the conflict is taking form. In dialogues one on one with every party, the teacher has an opportunity to give the children good role models on how to behave in conflicts – even towards a person who has employed negative means.

### Legitimizing

Dialogues about legitimacy of the participant's goals are also conducted with one party at the time. When the student has the possibility to reflect on the validity of their goals, and on possible reactions from the other parties without them being present, the tendency of including the goals of others in their own increases. And this enhances the children's own ongoing legitimizing processes. Children are often equipped with a very well developed sense of justice, and this can be used as a resource. Is this solution fair? Is it likely that someone will be offended by this suggestion? The key question is if the suggested solution violates any of the parties' basic needs.

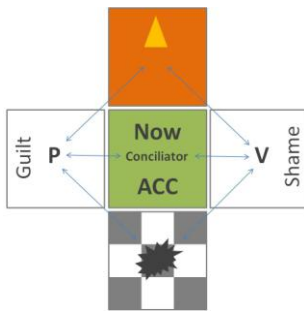
### Bridging

The first two phases may very well be on the agenda in the same dialogue, and here the SortingMat is a practical tool. It is essential that both mapping and legitimizing have been addressed. When this has been done, the parties are "ready for the table". Now they all join together in the bridging process where the challenge is to visualise a situation/ future/ solution that is able to accommodate every party's legitimate goals. Creativity is much needed in this process. When children have understood the method, one can easily be amazed by their creativity and ability to find new and unexpected solutions. We are not chasing the one right solution, but the many good ideas – that will create a sense of thrust for the future: "Of course we will find a solution to this"! The end result may very well be a combination of solutions, or one is tried out first – with the others in reserve if needed. One important lesson from this method is that the children trust they will find solutions – it is there if they try hard enough.

### Learning Objectives

- The three phases: Mapping (parties and goals), legitimizing (goals and means), and bridging
- It is okay to have different goals, the problem may be their compatibility
- Creativity and imagination are some of the most important resources in handling conflicts

## 7 Seven: 5 squares, 1 cross, 1 recipe – the CONCILIATION CROSS



- Red Cross, and Red Crescent – an inspiration to the illustration
- Rarely one of the parties carries all the guilt.
- Conflict is relational – so must the sorting- and healing process be
- Violence and unsolved problems tie people together in a negative way
- The two white squares encourage people to report from both sides
- The 3 elements Acknowledge, Concrete, Change – have proven to be effective parts of an apology.

### Background

Sometimes we do things we would rather see undone. All of us have had that experience. Even if we had good reasons to react what we did was nevertheless unfair. And if somebody feels hurt or unjustly treated then a relation between human beings has been damaged. Friendship comes to an end; to be together is no longer the same. Often more than one party may wish something undone as one bad word-act stimulates another into a solid knot. Everybody touched by the breakdown feels the trauma – negative associations chain people together and consume energy. Sometimes people did not know each other before the bad situation occurred – like a car accident or blind violence. Until the involved persons are able to do the job of letting go and (re-)concile, they are still chained. Who should take the first step, and how may we untie the knot?

We could imagine that he who has done most wrong should start with an apology, but two concerns enter the picture. First of all, unfairness is subjective. Somebody may be hurt by something another person would have not registered as a problem. On the other hand, a knot on social relations is harmful for everybody involved, so everybody has an interest in untying it. Often the strongest persons see their own part of the problem, and the more ability they have to untie the mess, the less negative knots will they have in their baggage. And this is where the conciliation cross enters as a useful tool.

Red Cross, and Red Crescent, gives good associations. A well thought through plan and structure in a field dominated by suffering, anger, thoughts of retribution, and other negative emotions may have a decisive influence on a constructive outcome. Thinking it through, and building confidence in a process for conciliation as a part of training for life competence prepare people for difficult situations. There is some knowledge of what to do, and like for the Red Cross the goal is to be efficient, non-judgmental, not taking sides.

When we become aware of a violent situation, inside, outside or between people, then it is usually the last link in a train of events that has caught our attention. Much may have happened before we notice, many actors may have participated, many may have experienced some kind of transgression. It is tempting to judge the situation from the picture we perceive when we enter the scene, but our experiences in similar situations may make us accept that what we have seen is only part of a larger process. Generally we conclude after an unpleasant conversation, or an unfriendly action, in a situation ending far from what we had planned that we had not quite understood what really happened. As mentioned, one word-act may lead to the next, and negative charges ignite the actors. There are often many transactions-interactions in an escalation that ends with violence.

Only rarely has one of the parties all of the *guilt*. Who can tell if one person carries 10, 50 or 80 % of the guilt? And regardless of the conclusion it will be *subjective*. Each party has its own idea of the responsibility for what went wrong. To start with guilt distribution may, consequently, be one of the least fruitful ways of untying a knot. What is constructive and appropriate is the feedback to the negative actions observed, and they will be more effective if they follow the guidelines indicated in the

means-ends principle, distinguish between actions-means and goals-ends. An example of an intervention could run like this: "I understand that much has happened here and that several of you have a feeling of being badly treated. I saw that you, Tom, were kicking Betty, and that kind of behavior is not acceptable. You know that. I would like to talk with you about all of this, and I am sure that we can find a better solution."

Be also attentive to the possibility of misunderstandings. We may never fully know what others think and feel. Much is left to our interpretation of the situation. Our reaction will be triggered by how we perceive what others did or said. There are plenty of possibilities for misinterpretations!

## **Five squares**

The Conciliation Cross consists of five squares. The squares may be put on top of each other and then be presented in the order below to convey what each one of them represents.

*The past field* - checkered - focuses on the negative that happened in the past. It is similar to field 2 in the SortingMat, with the difference that this one represents all the parties and the clash they share.

*The actor fields* - the two white fields - represent the parties and their feelings as perpetrator or victim. Where violence has been committed a feeling of *guilt* may arise, and being a victim of violence may be followed by a feeling of *shame*. Since most situations ending with violence consist of transactions with negative Bs (ABC triangle) all four, perpetrator and victim, guilt and shame, may be more or less present in all the parties.

*The present field* - green like the legitimating field on the solution ladder - is where the conciliator enters. This may be a person, a conciliator, or the will to come together to clear up whatever negative relation the parties had in the past.

*The future field* - orange for creativity and possibilities - has the letter C, conciliation, stand for what may be obtained in the future for the parties. Conciliation is above all a subjective process that happens inside each one of the parties. Just like anger and feelings of frustration are based on a human interpretation of what others do, conciliation is linked to how everybody is processing and interpreting what happened. If the parties can agree to a joint project where everybody contributes to bring about change, this increases a feeling of something positive. But, as mentioned, that they all agree, consensus is not a condition for conciliation inside the individual person.

## **One cross – A meeting place for the dialogue**

The center in the Conciliation Cross is a meeting place for dialogue. Everyone is reinforced as a human being when some space is provided to meet the others in an open and questioning dialogue about what happened, how it was experienced by them singly and combined, and how to assist each other exploring a road out of the wilderness. Ideally all are prepared to take responsibility for own actions, and also to welcome admissions one would like to hear from others that they have done something negative. If we are able to reflect on what conflicts are and on how to think practically and in a solution-oriented manner about conflicts, then we are also better prepared to handle the tidying work needed so as to bring about reconciliation.

Another important reason to offer apologies as part of the dialogue is that conflicts are relational; so efforts to clear up the situation must also be relational, like in a dialogue.

Imagine now that the action, or the words, needed for an apology are the last steps in a process that has oscillated back and forth for some time. Even if what happened most recently was worse than what happened before - and for that reason strongly reprimanded - there may be many who wish certain things undone or unsaid. Anyone acknowledging having committed mistakes makes it easier for others to do the same, "Yes that was stupid of you, but what I said was not so brilliant either!" A dialogue about taking responsibility is on the way, maybe also involving those who conceived of themselves as victims.

## **One recipe – The ACC principle**

How does a good apology look? As mentioned, misunderstandings or negative actions have a tendency to create knots on the relations between human beings. When we feel we have been

unfairly treated somebody who acknowledges responsibility for what happened, who understands what s/he did and says it will not be repeated is a gift. An example: "I am sorry about what happened. I stupidly told my neighbor that you and your friend have problems, and probably will break up. I now understand how harmful and unnecessary this was, and will watch what I say in the future." Or: "It was not Anne, I was the one who took the apple from your bag. It was so visible, and I was so angry because I felt that you tried to take my best friend away from me. I wanted revenge. I wish I had acted differently, and promise to talk with you next time I might be angry."

Experience points to three steps to untie the relation knot: *Acknowledgment*: I did something that I would rather see undone; *Concrete*: this is concretely what I did; I had some reasons and I invite you all for a dialogue around what happened; and *Change*: consequences of negative action are more easily handled if there is confidence that it will not be repeated. ACC.

**Acknowledgment.** It hurts to feel insulted by others. If those who uttered the insulting words, or were behind the actions in addition deny what happened, then bad becomes even worse. To say, for instance, "I am sorry you took it that way!" does not help, it puts the blame for what happened on the insulted party, and hurts even more. But what happens if I acknowledge my role in what happened, and other parties who also contributed negatively do not do the same? Well, this may be experienced as unfair. But the person who takes responsibility is rewarded with respect, and in addition to that has a feeling of release from carrying that heavy burden. Like going to the toilet after three days of constipation: there is a feeling of relief at no longer carrying something unpleasant.

**Concrete.** It is important to understand exactly what was perceived as insulting by the other or others. It may happen that what is seen as wrong is not what others experienced that way. Thus, the dialogue about the concrete facts in the situation may clarify and create a feeling of understanding of exactly where the insulting aspect was located. This creates a sensation of equality: we are all parties to the knot, and can all contribute to untying it so that we can move ahead.

**Change.** In order to undo the damage done faith that it will not be repeated is needed. We would like a confirmation from the perpetrators that they have understood how harmful this was. What could be better for this than a joint project? Doing something together? Something that unties the knot from the past and in addition points into a new and shared future. Or, sometimes a shared future is not favorable or wished for by all parties. It could just as well be a good solution for the parties to go separate ways. And still the knot is there, and it will be a good thing for everyone involved to do the conciliation work before leaving the scene. Then the conciliation would be the joint project that reveals them from carrying the clotted past along to the future.

## Learning Objectives

- Clearly, we all make mistakes once in a while
- When we have done something that hurt others, it may help to know how to straighten it out
- Timeline: Past – trauma. Now – ACC-process. Future – freedom, unchained, joint project
- Traumas chain people together in a painful way
- Everyone in the trauma chain will benefit from helping to untie the knot
- A recipe for a good apology: acknowledge what happened, be concrete about where the mistake was located, changing outside behavior, inner attitudes and the relation between the parties.
- When unchained – they are free to participate in a joint project to build the relation for the future, or to go their separate ways without unnecessary hurt or carry bad feelings

## Literature

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