



Leadership Lesson #2: COMMUNICATE WITH CLARITY

Overview: Youth are introduced to a powerful exercise that teaches them how to work together and communicate in groups.

Learner Outcomes

Youth will:

1. Understand how they communicate within a group.
2. Know how to use I-language, paraphrasing, and VOEMP as conflict resolution models.
3. Know how to craft a message for maximum effectiveness.

Getting Ready

Materials: Youth need a journal and pencil; staff need 1 thin, lightweight, 10 ft. tent pole. The lighter the pole, the more difficult the activity will be.

Lesson at a Glance

Helium Stick (20 minutes)

A team builder in which the challenge is to lower the helium stick to the ground.

Debrief the Helium Stick (10 minutes)

After completing the exercise, engage in a discussion about the easy and difficult parts of the activity.

Application of Communication (4 minutes)

Explore the idea that the exercise mirrors the communication dynamic of being on the work site or at camp.

VOEMP (Ventilation, Owning, & Empathy, Plan) (18 minutes)

Explore the VOEMP Model to identify conflict resolution strategies.

Concluding the Lesson (8 minutes)

Reflect and analyze conflict communication styles and identify an area of improvement.

Guidelines

- a. Own what you believe you actually did or said - not more, not less.
- b. Set your own experience aside for a moment and try to imagine why they reacted to you as they did. Try walking in his or her shoes and let them know how you imagine that feels.

Traps

- a. Needing to vent more- it is important that both of you are in the same stage together, so if one of you is still venting, you both need to go back to the ventilation and paraphrasing stage.
- b. Believing in your total innocence - you usually have contributed something to the problem.
- c. Trying to move to this stage before ventilation is finished so that residue is left for future conflicts.

Plan

This is the stage where you talk about how things will be different, what each of you wants and what you are each willing to do to avoid it happening again.

Guidelines

- a. Make sure you do this stage! People often do not and then the conflict resurfaces. Keep it realistic, and do not make promises you will not be able to keep.
- b. Expect that you both may slip up occasionally.
- c. Say very clearly what you want. Accept that the other person has a choice whether s/he can give all of that to you. Negotiate. Be honest.
- d. Collaboratively plan and problem-solve.

Traps

- a. Planning before the other stages are done.
- b. Not saying what you are committed to doing differently or getting a commitment from the other person.
- c. Not saying what you want the other to do differently and hearing their response to that.
- d. Thinking that the other person is bad if they cannot give you what you want.

Background

The following material is used in the suggested procedure and is necessary to instruct the lesson. Adapted from Doran, 2009.

VOEMP (Ventilation, Owning & EMpathy, Plan)

Ventilation

Take turns airing feelings and thoughts and make sure everyone understands what the other person is saying. It is very important that no one skips this stage and that youth participate one at a time. Take turns with one person actively listening and paraphrasing, while the other talks. The goal is not to agree or disagree, but to make sure you both understand how the other person views the problem and to express your view. Ventilation does not mean abuse or cheap shots; it means being candid and saying what is going on for you.

Guidelines

- a. Be candid and let yourself discover what is really bothering you.
- b. Expect to hear a version different than your own.
- c. Paraphrase what you think the other person is saying; make sure s/he paraphrases you.

Traps

- a. Avoid expressing what is going on just for you. It is important to accept the other person's point of view; this doesn't mean you have to agree with them, however, you should be able to say, "This is what I think I'm hearing you say... Is this correct?"
- b. Not accepting how someone expresses him or herself. We all do it differently, however if it is abusive then you should stop immediately.
- c. Sarcasm, angry questions, cheap shots, etc. make it hard to get past ventilation.
- d. Focusing only on one person in a situation.

Owning and Empathy

After both people have aired their feelings and paraphrased the other person, move into ownership and empathy. This is the stage where you say what you do that contributes to the conflict and imagine what it is like to be in the other person's shoes.

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Suggested Procedure

Helium Stick (20 minutes)

1. Introduce the Helium Stick while holding the tent pole in your hand. Explain that it is not a stick, because it is full of helium (act as if the stick is floating out of your hands, be playful). The goal is to lower the helium stick to the ground as a team.
2. Invite youth to line up in two even rows, facing each other. Ask them to point their two index fingers out on each hand and hold their arms out at a 90-degree angle. Then instruct them to zipper their fingers together with the person opposite them.
3. Lay the Helium Stick down on their fingers. Ask the group to adjust their finger height until the Helium Stick is at a horizontal level and everyone's index fingers are touching the Helium Stick.
4. Explain the challenge is to lower the Helium Stick to the ground as a team. Here is the catch: Each person's fingers must be in contact with the Helium Stick at all times. Pinching, grabbing, or curling your fingers around the pole is not allowed – it must rest on top of fingers, with your fingers laying straight. Reiterate to the group that if anyone's finger is caught not touching the Helium Stick or if fingers are grasping the Helium Stick, the group will have to restart. **(D1)**
5. Warning: Particularly in the early stages, the Helium Stick has a habit of mysteriously floating up rather than coming down, causing much laughter. A bit of clever humor can help – i.e. act surprised and ask what are they doing raising the Helium Stick instead of lowering it! For added drama pull it away anytime a youth's finger is not touching or the group starts to lose control of it. The point is for this activity to be challenging, so don't let anything slip by you.

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6. If the group starts to become frustrated in their communication or they are a high functioning group that is completing the activity quickly, you can add further difficulty. Create a new rule that they have to finish in silence, they must choose only one youth to speak for them, or blind fold a couple members of the group. Be creative about making this task challenging so that communication becomes the key element to complete the activity.

Debrief the Helium Stick (10 minutes)

Once the group has successfully completed the task, celebrate the group's accomplishment. Then invite the youth to join in a discussion of what did and did not work. **(F1)**

1. Discussion ideas:
 - a. What was the initial reaction of the crew?
 - b. How well did the group cope with this challenge?
 - c. What skills did it take to be successful?
 - d. What creative solutions were suggested and how were they received?
 - e. What would an outside observer have seen as the strengths and weaknesses of the crew?
 - f. What did each person learn about themselves as an individual?
 - g. What other situations (e.g., at YCC, in your community or at school) are like the Helium Stick?
 - h. Transition question: What role did communication play in lowering the Helium Stick?

Application of Communication (4 minutes)

1. Explain to youth that this task can mirror the communication dynamic of being on the work site or at camp. For example, it is like having a stewardship project that starts out strong but does not end well.



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- b. Paraphrasing means clarifying what the other person intended, before responding to them. There are several types of paraphrasing:
 - i. **Parroting** is repeating back exactly what was said. For example, "OK, you want me to go to the trailhead, pick up your dog from your parents, and smuggle it into our site." It is very useful for making sure you understand directions, expectations, and requests. You re-state information in your own words to test your understanding.
 - ii. **Paraphrasing Plus** is when you paraphrase and then add your own thoughts or intuitions. Use this to pursue the fullest meaning and feelings of the other. It often takes the conversation to another level. Here's an example of such an exchange:

Person 1: "Ralph should have never become a crew leader."
Person 2: "You mean he isn't a very good crew leader?"
Person 1: "Oh no, I meant that he has such expensive tastes, that he'll never earn enough."
Person 2: "Oh, so you think he should have gone into a profession where he could earn more money."
Person 1: "Yep, YELL-YCC just isn't where he needs to be to pay off the loan on his Ferrari."

6. Explain that these are important strategies to use, but when a conflict escalates the VOEMP (Ventilation, Owning & Empathy, Plan) Model can help both parties to proceed. The stages make it highly likely that a conflict will be resolved through a positive, creative, and effective process, rather than a destructive or non-effective one.
7. Explain the VOEMP Model. Staff may want to model the different phases of VOEMP to engage youth.
8. VOEMP Role Play. Divide the group in two, and in each group have youth fill the following roles: Actor 1, Actor 2, Narrator /Summarizer.



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2. Ask: What are the different factors that can negatively or positively influence communication on a work site? **(F2)** Explain that sometimes these different factors can become an area of conflict for a group.

VOEMP (Ventilation, Owning & Empathy, Plan) (18 minutes)

Use the Helium Stick as a springboard for identifying conflict resolution strategies.

1. Explain the meaning of conflict. It can be defined as differences existing between two people or groups of people that serve to keep the parties apart in some way (J. Hall, Telometrics, 1994). It is a natural part of the human condition. We hold different values, we interpret things differently, and make mistakes. All these create the potential for conflict. The manner in which you respond determines the probability of it being resolved.
2. Ask: What are positive ways you have dealt with conflict in your life? Listen to their examples, then transition into the two strategies for dealing with conflict.
3. Explain that the first strategy to dealing with conflict is “I”-Language and Ownership.
 - a. Central to communication is awareness that your thoughts, sensations, feelings and desires originate inside you. You may feel empowered if you do something as simple as switching from saying “You make me mad,” to “I feel mad at you.”
 - b. The purpose of “I”-language is to take ownership. When you perceive in terms of “I”, your experience changes, you recognize that you create your own experience and people “out there” do not do it to you (that way of seeing the world is called blaming).
 - c. This does not mean it cannot be abused. An example of “I”-language abuse is “I feel angry when you act like a jerk.”
4. Instruct youth to brainstorm two examples realistic statements that do NOT use I-language in their journals. Then in partners, have them share what they wrote with a partner and rephrase them into “I” statements.
5. Explain the second strategy to dealing with a conflict: Paraphrasing or Active Listening.
 - a. Active listening is the key to good dialogue. It includes listening to the other person and checking in to make sure that you understood what they meant through paraphrasing.



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9. Each group selects one of the following scenarios:
 - a. Not liking someone’s music
 - b. Eating someone else’s food on the dry food storage shelf
 - c. Some one goes through your stuff
 - d. Not letting someone try something new on the worksite

Next they will practice role-playing their scenario with a negative outcome and a positive outcome. Direct them to use the VOEMP model to create the positive role-play scenario. Afterwards, the groups will present to one another.

Conclusion: (8 minutes) Ask youth to take a moment to reflect and analyze their own style of communication during conflicts. In their journals, have them identify one area of improvement and one conflict strategy that would be important to incorporate in their lives. **(S1)**

Assessment Check Ins:

(D1): Assists the staff in understanding the youths’ individual communication styles.

(F1): Provides insight into the degree and depth their self-awareness in the context of their communication style during the Helium Stick activity. So staff can adjust the lesson as necessary.

(S1): Assesses what youth have learned and transfers it into their experience at YELL-YCC.



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Staff Notes:

- **Helium Stick:** How does it work? The secret is that the upwards pressure created by everyone's fingers tends to be greater than the weight of the stick. As a result, the more a group tries, the more the stick tends to float upwards. Youth may be confused initially about the paradoxical behavior of the Helium Stick.
 - Some crews may be inclined to give up, believing that it is not possible or that it is too hard. The facilitator can offer direct suggestions or suggest the group stops the task, discusses their strategy, and then try again. Less often, a crew may appear to be succeeding too fast. In response, be particularly vigilant about fingers touching the pole. Also make sure participants lower the pole all the way onto the ground. The key is for the group to calm down, concentrate, and very slowly, patiently lower the Helium Stick.

References:

Booth Sweeney, L. & D. Meadows (1996). *The systems thinking playbook: Exercises to stretch and build learning and systems thinking capabilities*. The Turning Point Foundation.

Doran, M. (2009). A Way To Manage And Deal With Conflict: Ventilation, Ownership, Empathy, & Planning (VOEMP). In J. Gookin, & S. Leach, (5th Ed.). NOLS Leadership Educator Notebook: A Toolbox For Leadership Educators. (p. 20). Lander, WY: The National Outdoor Leadership School.

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Helium Stick. (2009, October 12). Retrieved from
<http://www.wilderdom.com/games/descriptions/HeliumStick.html>

Incorporates the “Helium Stick Activity” which, served as the central activity. It was modified in the following ways: Instructional language was changed to match the REC; the introduction and conclusion are additions.

Kosseff, A. (2003). AMC Guide to Outdoor Leadership: Trip Planning, Risk Management, Group Dynamics, Decision Making. Guilford, (p. 227). CT: Global Pequot Press, Inc.

Incorporates the Risk Management concepts, which served as the central aspect. It was modified in the following way: Instructional language changed to match the REC.

Taylor, R., & Crosy, B. (1995). VOMP: A Way Through Conflict To Resolution. Bellevue, WA: Leadership Institute of Seattle.

Incorporates the VOEMP Model, which served as a central activity. It was modified in the following way: Instructional language changed to match the REC.

Handouts: None

