

The Satir Tool

- Using the Adequate Style of Communication in a Negotiation

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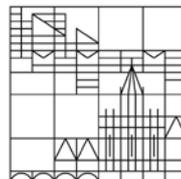
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Summary of Proposal

Different communication styles have long been an essential part of family therapy. Especially, when people are under stress they adopt certain ways of communicating to others. Hence, Virginia Satir, one of the pioneers of family therapy, has coined four different ways of negative communication and a leveling communication style to overcome these. The following tool will show in detail how a mediator can help in a negotiation through teaching how to use the adequate style of communication and how to influence your communication partner in a way that he uses it, too.

Background

Over her life Virginia Satir defined three different ways of therapeutic intervention in family therapy. This so called “Satir Model” focuses on three major areas, which are still in use: the intrapsychic, the interactive, and the family of origin intervention. As a tool for negotiation, especially, the interactive intervention and its theory behind it is of great relevance. To set the context for this tool, certain beliefs are required, that a mediator should have. Satir defined these as therapeutic beliefs. A mediator should be convinced that change is always possible. He/she should be aware that it is a change in being, not only in feeling or doing. The mediation should focus on improving one’s coping instead of just solving one’s problems. As well, he/she should know that most people choose familiarity over discomfort or fear of change, especially during times of stress.

This last belief already brings us to Virginia Satir’s well-known survival stances. In her opinion everyone learns how to react to family members in a certain way in his/her childhood. These reactions are manifested in a role that we slip in over and over again. This role can hence cover our authentic self and endure until adulthood. The roles we have learned to adopt while communicating with others are called survival stances. Especially, in fear of change or under pressure, we choose familiarity over discomfort and adopt these styles of communicating (the four survival stances). These four styles can be placating, computing, blaming or distracting. People have learned to use them as shields to avoid being hurt. How a person and which of them he/she uses differs individually. In addition, these styles can be seen in countless combinations and variations.

The first of the four survival stances is the placating one. This stance is affected by affirmative actions stating that he/she does everything to please the other. The second survival stance is the blaming stance. It is quite the opposite of the placating stance through dismissive actions. He/she looks for the defendants’ mistakes and wants to act out power using accusations and being condescend to others. The third stance is a compute stance. A person

using it is over-reasonable with a dry and monotonous speech, without showing feelings, trivializing and rationalizing. The fourth and last survival stance is the distracting one. As the name says itself it is all about misleading to another topic, not focusing and inwardly seeking appreciation without revealing much about him-/herself.

A fifth style is called leveling communication. It represents the authentic self and is considered to be the adequate communication style. Its purpose of function is direct, open and attentive. A leveler uses eye contact with a relaxed body, yet mobilized. It represents congruence between his/her words, voice and body language. The key ingredient to it is considered to be a good level of internal self-esteem.

These now briefly explained stances are of great relevance for this mediated negotiation tool, because it basically teaches how to react to a negotiation partner, who uses these styles and how to make the communication flow again. Therefore, lead to a result.

Areas of Application

This tool shall be used in a setting consistent of three persons - two negotiation partners and a mediator. Therefore it is a tool for a mediated negotiation. It is already partly applied in family therapy. Certainly, this tool focuses on the right communication and can therefore be applied in nearly every negotiation situation consistent of three persons. However, this specific tool focuses on negotiation in a business context.

General Framework

As mentioned before, in order of an effective result the group size should not exceed a size of three, including the mediator. The tool shall be used, when a negotiation is stuck or whenever the parties have the feeling of a dead end in communication. In addition it should be used in a closed mediated negotiation. An adequate amount of time shall be given, so that the parties can really understand and learn the stances and learn how to react to them. For this explanation and learning part a time frame of at least 20 minutes is suggested. For the more interactive part, where each person takes over the stance of the other, a 10 minutes time frame is recommended. In the end there shall be no explicit time frame for ending the negotiation while using a leveling style with the newly acquired knowledge about how to react to the other.

Goal

The goal of this tool is that both parties can continue with a negotiation, which leads to a result. It aims that they overcome the survival stances and communicate in a leveling style. Whenever they fall back into survival stances, the negotiation partner shall be capable of reacting in the right way leading the negotiation back to a leveling style. Additionally, it should be the aim of the mediator to improve their coping instead of just solving their problem.

Description of the Tool

The tool consists of four different stages – explaining the stances, explaining how to react, letting each party take over the survival stance the other uses and letting them find a congruent communication through mediating using a leveling communications style and their acquired knowledge.

Explaining the Stances

A time frame of 5-10 minutes shall be given. The mediator explains the four survival stances.

Placate.

A person using this stance always agrees. He/she does everything to please the other. It can be identified by a lowered body position, averted eyes, a squeaky or whining voice.

Blame.

A blamer always disagrees. He/she wants to demonstrate his power. It can be recognized a loud speech, posturing, intimidating gestures and maybe through hitting objects.

Compute.

A computer is ultra-reasonable, rationalizing and trivializing the content of communication. He/she shows no feelings and seems to be above all and logical. It can be detected by a flat and monotonous tone, big words, stiff and unmoving posture and talking like a reference book.

Distract.

A distracter seems to make no sense. He/she does not follow the topic and changes subject quickly. This style is defined by constant movement, ignoring questions, misleading the topic, staring, yawning or similar actions.

Explaining How to React

The second part of the tool consists of explaining to the parties how to react to the stances. In the following I will explain how a negotiation partner shall react, if the other uses one of these following stances. While reacting as given, one shall adopt a leveling communication style, meaning that he/she shall be respectful, honest, direct, open, authentic and congruent in speech, body language and facial expressions. It should not take more than 5-10 minutes.

Placate.

Ask the person for his/her opinion, acknowledge him/her, let the placater decide and express needs and demands. Do not take on responsibility.

Blame.

Translate negative things into positive ones, translate accusations into needs and wishes, phrase "I ..." - messages, cut in on destructive sequences and focus on what he wants instead of how he feels.

Compute.

Be responsive, acknowledge him/her, address emotions and do not exert pressure.

Distract.

Use clear language, come to the point, lead back to the topic and end negotiation precisely.

Taking Over the Survival Stances of the Negotiation Partner

For the third part of the tool, the mediator shall let each person write down the survival stance(s) he/she has seen so far in his negotiation partner. Then they will start the negotiation again while they adopt the stances they have written down as does it seems like they are imitating the other. For this exercise the partners should have 10 minutes.

Finding Congruent Communication

In this last part of the tool the negotiation partners will continue with their negotiation while explicitly using a leveling communication style. Whenever someone falls back in to his old scheme, using one of the stances, the other shall react accordingly as learned to this stance. This will lead back to a congruent/leveling communication style. The mediator should intervene whenever the reactions are not leveling or help when needed. The mediator should, of course, react in a leveling style.

Examples for the Detection of Survival Stances

Placater

“Whatever you want is fine.”; “Yes, I agree with everything.”; sits or stands in a victim position with his/her eyes looking up to the other

Blamer

“You never do anything right!“, “What is the matter with you?“, “It is your fault!“; looks angry, uses objurgatory gestures

Computer

“If one would look carefully, one might notice the work-worn hand of someone here.”, “If one analyses the statistics carefully, one can draw the conclusion that ...“; stiff body position, does not move or uses conducted gestures, blank facial expression

Distracter

“What did you say? Oh, what do you think about ... (other topic)“, chiseled body, looks away, averts his/her body or uses confusing gestures

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