

What Is the Third Side?

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss an additional approach to conflict resolution that aims to consider the broader effects of a conflict. The specific areas of focus include:

1. The Third Side
2. Engaging the Third Side in the process

1. The Third Side

Whenever there is a conflict, there are always at least two sides involved. These are the parties who are directly affected by the conflict and invested in its outcome.

However, these two parties may not always be the only people invested in the outcome, and there may be additional people who need to be included in the resolution process.

The Third Side is an approach to conflict resolution developed by the Harvard Negotiation Project, whose mission is to improve the practice and theory of conflict resolution and negotiation by working on real world conflicts. The Third Side approach looks at the perspectives and interests of those affected by the conflict in the larger community, as well as of the parties themselves. In other words, this approach takes the legitimate needs of the two primary parties, or sides, into consideration, while also considering the needs of the larger community, which is the third side in the conflict. The third side could be made up of neighbors, friends, bystanders, or anyone else who may be affected by the outcome of the conflict.

The difference between the Third Side approach and party-party mediation is that in the Third Side approach, there is the consideration for the additional side's:

- Perspectives
- Interests
- Needs
- Influence

All of these sides are taken into consideration when developing a resolution.

This is called the triple win, as the the legitimate needs of the primary parties, as well as those of the larger community are being considered.



TERM TO KNOW

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2. Engaging the Third Side in the Process

In terms of the conflict itself, the model for the Third Side is to:

- Contain
- Resolve
- Prevent

This process really calls on community members to consider and recognize when they are a third side, and then actually influence the outcome of the conflict.

This has the opportunity to work in a variety of circumstances.

➦ **EXAMPLE** When bullying happens in a school, teachers, administrators, and parents can come together to form a mediation program. In Minneapolis schools, there is a program called Peace Circles, which works with students to give them the skills that they need to resolve conflicts in more constructive ways.

The Third Side approach is less about trying to eliminate conflict, and more about transforming how it's expressed.

➦ **EXAMPLE** In many communities, neighbors get to know and watch out for one another. They form unofficial and official community groups to learn the problems and needs of their collective.

This is how the Third Side enables the emergent will of the community, and the power of that will in transforming what happens within the community.

IN CONTEXT

One particularly inspiring story of the Third Side approach took place in East Los Angeles in the early 1990s. Gang warfare was escalating during that period, and there were a lot of deaths in the community. A group of concerned mothers met and decided to take the courageous step of going into the community, leaving the safety of their homes during this very violent and dangerous time, to encourage other mothers to join them in walking through the gang areas in the community. Their group grew to about 70 members, and they created a space for peace in dangerous areas through this nonviolent action.

This completely disoriented the gang members; they didn't know how to respond to these mothers walking into their territory. But what evolved from this action was more than just a brief lapse in violence. It evolved into a dialogue between the mothers and the gang members in which both groups spoke and were heard. The mothers listened to the gangs talk about the lack of jobs, and the police brutality. The mothers responded by developing a tortilla factory, a bakery, and childcare to allow the gang members to learn skills.

Then out of these developments came a school, and over time, the mothers became more of a

neighborhood watch team, reporting instances of police brutality. This began to cultivate a relationship between the police, the mothers, and the rest of the neighborhood. Not all the problems were solved, but it's clear that the emergent will of the community had an enormous influence on de-escalating the conflict and creating change.



BIG IDEA

The mission of the Third Side approach is to invite all of us to see how we can enter a conflict, whether it be in our communities, our organizations, or our own lives, as a third side in order to take a positive role in influencing the outcome of the conflict.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the Third Side is an approach to conflict resolution that considers not only the needs and perspectives of the two primary parties involved, but also those of the larger community, or anyone else who will be affected by the outcome of the conflict.

You now understand that when it comes to engaging the third side in the resolution process, it's really up to the community members to recognize when they are impacted by the conflict, and then decide to influence the outcome. As in any conflict resolution process, it's important that all sides have the chance to speak and be heard. By doing this, the community as a whole can come together to pursue positive change.

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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