

# WHAT ARE THE ROLES WE CAN PLAY IN A SITUATION OF MOUNTING TENSION OR CONFLICT?

10 Roles of the Third Side – William Ury (2003) [www.thirdside.org](http://www.thirdside.org)

Conflict does not come out of nowhere but proceeds from latent tension, develops into overt conflict, erupts into power struggle, and from there crosses the threshold of destructive conflict and violence. As third siders, our aim is not to suppress conflict altogether but simply to keep the trajectory of escalation below this threshold.

We have at least three major opportunities to channel the conflict's vertical momentum, leading to destruction, into a horizontal impulse, leading to constructive change. The first is to prevent destructive conflict from emerging in the first place by addressing latent tensions. The second is to resolve any overt conflicts which do develop. The third is to contain any escalating power struggles that temporarily escape resolution. What is not prevented is resolved; and what is not resolved is contained. The motto of the Third Side is thus: **"Contain if necessary, resolve if possible, best of all prevent."**

## What is the Third Side?

The Third Side offers a promising new way to look at the conflicts around us. The Third Side is the community -- us -- in action protecting our most precious interests in safety and well-being. It suggests 10 practical roles any of us can play on a daily basis to stop destructive conflict in our families, at work, in our schools, and in the world. Each of our individual actions is like a single spider web, fragile perhaps but, when united with others, capable of halting the lion of war. Unlike the ultimate arbiter in the form of a king or authoritarian state, the third side is not a transcendent individual or institution who dominates all, but rather the *emergent will of the community*. It is an impulse that arises from the vital relationships linking each member and every other member of the community.

### prevent



### resolve



### contain



## ROLES THAT HELP PREVENT

*"Contain if necessary, resolve if possible, best of all prevent." (William Ury)*

### **The Provider - Enabling People to Meet Their Needs**

Conflict usually arises in the first place from frustrated needs, like love and respect. Frustration leads people to bully others, to use violence, and to grab someone else's things. The most basic human needs include food (and other necessities for living), safety, identity, and freedom. If we as third siders can help people address one or more of these four needs we can avert destructive conflict. This is the role of the Provider.

- Share resources, share knowledge
- Give others a sense of security
- Offer respect
- Empower others

### **The Teacher - Giving People Skills to Handle Conflict**

Sometimes people fight simply because they know no other way to react when a need is frustrated and a serious difference arises. By helping people learn new values, perspectives and skills, we as Teachers can show them a better way to deal with differences.

- Delegitimize violence
- Teach tolerance
- Teach joint problem-solving

### **The Bridge-Builder -- Forging Relationships Across Lines of Conflict**

Good relationships are key to preventing conflict. Anyone can help build bridging relationships across natural divides. A relationship operates like savings in the bank; whenever an issue arises, the parties can dip into their account of goodwill to help deal with it. Often not a discrete activity, bridge-building takes place all around us, sometimes without us even perceiving it -- at family meals, on school projects, in business transactions, and at neighbourhood meetings.

- Creating cross-cutting ties
- Develop joint projects
- Foster genuine dialogue

## ROLES THAT HELP RESOLVE

### **The Mediator - Reconciling Conflicting Interests**

At the core of conflict are often conflicting interests. As mediators, we can help reconcile the parties' interests. The Mediator does not seek to determine who is right and who is wrong, but rather tries to get to the core of the dispute and help the parties resolve it. We may not think of it as mediation, but that is what we are doing whenever we listen attentively to people in dispute, when we ask them about what they really want, when we suggest possible approaches, and when we urge them to think hard about the costs of not reaching agreement.

- Everyone's a mediator
- Bring the parties to the table
- Facilitate communication
- Help people search for a solution

### **The Arbiter - Determining Disputed Rights**

Sometimes mediation is not enough to resolve a dispute or is not appropriate because basic rights are being violated. Whereas a mediator can only suggest a solution, an arbiter can decide what is right. The arbiter is a familiar role, embodied in the judge in the courtroom or the arbitrator in a work setting. More informally, the arbiter is the teacher deciding a dispute among two quarrelling students, the parent ruling

on a matter involving two children, or the manager determining an issue among two employees. In this sense, we are all potential arbiters.

- Replace destructive conflict
- Promote justice
- Encourage negotiation

### **The Equalizer - Democratizing Power**

Every conflict takes place within the larger context of power. Imbalance of power often leads to abuse and injustice. The strong refuse to negotiate with the weak or to submit their dispute to mediation or arbitration -- why should they, the strong think, when they can win? This is where the Equalizer has a contribution to make. Each of us holds a packet of power, a measure of influence over the parties around us. Individually, our influence may be small, but collectively, it can be considerable. We are capable of empowering the weak and the unrepresented so that they can negotiate a fair and mutually satisfactory resolution.

- Help bring the powerful to the table
- Build collaborative democracy
- Support nonviolent action

### **The Healer - Repairing Injured Relationships**

At the core of many conflicts lie emotions -- anger, fear, humiliation, hatred, insecurity, and grief. The wounds may run deep. Even if a conflict appears resolved after a process of mediation, adjudication, or voting, the wounds may remain and, with them, the danger that the conflict could recur. A conflict cannot be considered fully resolved until the injured relationships have begun to heal. The role of the Healer is to assist in this process.

- Create the right climate
- Listen and acknowledge
- Encourage apology

## **ROLES THAT HELP CONTAIN**

### **The Witness - Paying Attention to Escalation**

Destructive conflict does not just break out but escalates through different stages, from tension to overt conflict to violence. By watching carefully, the witness can detect warning signals, which, if acted on, can prevent escalation of conflict and even save lives. A witness can also speak up to persuade the parties to cease fighting and sound the alarm to call the attention of other Thirdsiders who can intervene as mediators, peacekeepers, or other witnesses.

- Watch out for early warning signals
- Go on patrol
- Speak out
- Get help fast

### **The Referee -- Setting Limits to Fighting**

Some fighting can be salutary. Fighting can serve the function of clearing the air and bringing suppressed problems into sharp focus.[13] If and when people do fight, it is important to reduce the harm. That is the role of the referee, who sets limits on fighting. Parents know this role well: "Pillows are OK, but fists are not." "No blows above the neck or below the belt." As referees, we can change the way people fight, replacing destructive weapons and methods with substantially less destructive ones.

- Establish rules for fair fighting
- Remove offensive arms
- Strengthen defences – non-offensively

### **The Peacekeeper - Providing Protection**

When the rules are broken and the limits on fighting exceeded, the community needs to employ the minimally forceful measures necessary to stop harmful conflict in its tracks. The role of Peacekeepers need not be limited to specialists like the police and U.N. Peacekeepers, it is a community function that

anyone may be called upon to play. When two children fight, adults can step in the middle and, if necessary, physically pull the two apart. The best peacekeepers never fight. They never fight because they don't need to. They accomplish their ends by intervening early and using persuasion.

- Interpose between parties
- Enforce the peace
- Pre-empt violence before it starts