

Activity 3.4 Developing Comfort with Ambiguity¹

“A true dilemma is a situation with options for action in which choosing one action leaves undone or on the table another action which should also be taken.”—Jack Crittenden

Description

This activity is designed to encourage participants to grapple with “no win” situations. Through discussion, participants will explore seemingly simple moral dilemmas which will actually expose the complexity of decision-making.

Learning Goals

- Develop an appreciation for complexity and ambiguity. Participants will move beyond simplistic “good vs. bad” binary thinking
- Learn to move beyond emotional responses and develop arguments for particular actions

Practice (60 minutes)

Step One	Pre-select a single or set of moral dilemmas from the What IF...Moral Dilemmas Collection	Pre
Step Two	In groups of 4-6 people, each participant should read and then react to the dilemma. Record or take note of initial reactions, such as “I’d do this...This is wrong...You can’t act that way, etc.” Get all views on the table without discussion or critical examination.	10 min
Step Three	Then move to the discussion and persuasion part of the discussion. Participants should ask each other questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What’s wrong with doing X?• What would someone who loves X say they like about it?• Why is doing Y the right thing to do?• Why would someone oppose Y?	20 min

¹ **Citation for this activity:** Jack Crittenden (2023). Developing Comfort with Ambiguity. In Hartman, Britt, & Byrd (Eds). *The Interactivity Foundation Collaborative Discussion Toolkit*. Retrieved from <https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/module-3-critical-collaboration>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's the argument against someone holding a certain view? <p>Tip: Push past emotional reactions and opinions and try to present arguments as best you can.</p> <p>Tip: For those who refuse to move off their position or see the position of others, ask them to articulate and defend the opposite view.</p>	
Step Four	<p>Initiate a round of “monkey wrench.” When the discussion begins to slow down or reach consensus or an impasse, initiate a lightning round of “twists.” Going around the circle, each person introduces a new twist to make the dilemma more difficult or force participants to think about it in new ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What if this had happened instead of that? • What if this person was really this type of person? • What if this unintended consequence resulted? <p>Tip: The Monkey Wrench can add new variables, alter the dilemma, or use another strategy with the aim of getting some participants off-balance. Continue the discussion.</p>	20 min
Step Five	<p>Wrap-up the discussion by rearticulating the broad responses and highlighting the conflicts. If the dilemma and discussion are rich, participants should have developed some appreciation for the complexity of situations that on the surface might not seem at all complex.</p> <p>Tip: Practicing this activity once will not automatically result in participants being comfortable with ambiguity. Like all skills, it needs to be practiced regularly. Consider adapting this activity for shorter amounts of time, like 15-minute Moral Dilemma Speed Rounds as a warm-up exercise at the beginning of any class or meeting. With practice, participants will develop an appreciation for the complexity of situations.</p>	10 min

Reflection

- How, if at all, did your initial reaction to this dilemma change over the course of the discussion? What helped you to change your mind? Or, what helped you to solidify your initial reactions?
- How important was it to discuss this dilemma with others? Could you have had a similar conversation in your own mind? What benefit, if any, did discussion contribute to your understanding of the issue?
- What role did values, assumptions, experiences play in this discussion? What would it take to reach a universal agreement about this particular dilemma?

Practice Journal

This week, select a moral dilemma and share it with a trusted group during a casual gathering time (family dinner or lunch with colleagues or friends). Practice the process (getting ideas on the table, diving deeper with questions, and then introducing a monkey wrench). Describe the discussion and your experience facilitating it.

Dive Deeper: Additional Resources

- [The Problem with Binary Thinking - article by David Stein](#)