

Hassle Lines

Dealing with Confrontation and Staying Safe

Why use this exercise?

- Hassle lines are a well established method of giving your workshop participants the opportunity to explore their own emotional response to direct action related conflict situations, and to practice some simple body language and voice techniques to help de-escalate that conflict.
- As with many other physical exercises, they keep the workshop feeling dynamic and interactive.
- Hassle Lines are great for giving an experiential side to the thinking about nonviolent interaction, de-escalating conflict, and staying grounded that your workshop may have covered at this point.

Issues to explore

- Responses to conflict – *what aggravates conflict and what de-escalates it?* Some obvious things may emerge, like body language, tone of voice, (lack of) eye contact. There may be other less obvious things, such as the use of silence.
- *Power and empowerment* – where does the power lie in the interaction? How can the balance be changed?



How to run the exercise:

1. Line the participants up in two lines facing each other. In larger groups this can be facilitated by asking people to shake hands with the person opposite them (to ensure they have a partner).
2. Give the group a warning that this is a roleplay technique that can stir up unexpected emotions. Make sure everyone feels able to step aside and observe the roleplay at any time.
3. One side of the line plays the role of the protester. The other plays the role of police, security, employees or member of the public, depending on the scenario you're using. NB: these encounters should be strictly verbal unless you specify otherwise – make sure people are aware of this (ignore small & inevitable examples of touch such as a hand on the elbow/shoulder) but don't tolerate 'violence' such as pushing and shoving unless that's specifically what you're exploring.
4. The two lines should be separated by a short distance (about 2 paces) so that when the hassle line starts one side can step forward and there is a sense of coming together.
5. Work through 2-4 of the following scenarios, letting each one run for somewhere between 30 seconds and 3 minutes (until it naturally climaxes or you need to move on).
6. Observe for interesting actions and reactions (fists waved in faces, one person looming over another, raised voices, calm voices, eye contact, smiling, silence, sitting down, turning away etc).
7. Stop the action, step in between the lines and ask people to get out of their role. You might like to encourage them to have a quick shake, or pause for reflection before debriefing. In a more tense encounter, make a conscious effort to take people out of role.

8. Then debrief by asking for a few opinions and experiences from each side and facilitating short discussion on key points. Feel free to pick out important examples of behaviour (good or bad, body language or voice control) and ask direct questions. NB: you won't be able to take every comment – make this clear at the start of the debrief.

9. Questions might involve asking who felt in the position of power and why; how people felt when faced with particular behaviour; whether particular behaviour inflamed or calmed the situation e.g: Does a silent protester aggravate the police and lead to a more rapid descent into physical violence? Does remaining silent make the protester feel more powerful? Does eye contact help? When the protester smiles is that seen as a sign of warmth or superiority?. Question using emotive language ('how did you feel' rather than 'what did you think') to encourage an emotional response.

10. You might want to briefly demonstrate good or bad body language or use of voice as part of the debriefs. Alternatively this can be done as an introduction or conclusion to the session (see below for notes on this).

11. Swap roles with each new scenario (protester side of the line become police and vice versa). It can be useful to get everyone on one side of the line to move down one person, so that participants work with a new partner each time. This is especially useful to equalise obvious imbalances (noisy vs quiet person/ tall vs short person).

12. Final reflections at the end focusing on behaviour and the emotional experience.

Example Scenarios:

We find it works well to pick one overall scenario that suits the group you're working with. So for a peace group you might have peace protesters blocking a gate on a military base to prevent delivery of bombs that will be used in a current and controversial conflict. They might come into conflict with police

officers charged with clearing the road and generally upholding the law. You can then run a selection of short roleplays such as the ones below:

- **First scenario:** Police approach and, politely but firmly, ask protester to leave. Protester briefed to react naturally – whatever comes to them.
- **Second scenario:** As above but protester reminded about the need for calm and unprovocative body language and voice.
- **Third scenario:** Protesters are faced with an casual employee (e.g. cleaner, kitchen staff) who wants to go to work and won't be paid if they don't turn up.
- **Fourth scenario:** Police briefed (without protesters' knowledge) to approach aggressively, swearing and shouting if you feel it is appropriate and the group will cope with the tension, protesters still acting as individuals (i.e. not briefed to work together, though it may happen naturally!). In debrief, stress that this is not common behaviour, but can happen, and better to experience the shock/fear/aggression in a safe space first.
- **Fifth scenario:** Police briefed to work in 3s or 4s and 'gang up on' one individual from the protester lines, ignoring the others. In the debrief, discuss whether the other protesters just stood by, or acted in solidarity & support.
- **Sixth Scenario:** Police move forward as one unit, link arms and order the protester line back (shouting 'Get back'), pushing against the protesters as the 2 lines clash.

Timing:

You will need at least 20 minutes, in which time you might get through 3 scenarios with a short debrief after each. Ideally though you would allow yourself at least 35 minutes if not more.

Notes:

- Hassle lines are sometimes used to

practice perfecting the words you will say when challenged by authority/public. However, we usually use them to explore participants' emotional responses to conflict and the reality of confrontation and get beyond the merely verbal response. In this case, when debriefing, you will need to focus on these emotions and how modifying behaviour (voice, body language etc) can alter our emotional state, and the power balance of the scenario.

- Hassle Lines are roleplay and some people find it difficult to do roleplay. Do what you can to encourage everyone – they will find it difficult to be the police. You can help this process by:
- asking more experienced or assertive people to stand on the side of the line that is initially taking the role of police or security.
- Giving the 'police' an idea of what they might say and do. A few opening lines is often enough - “alright, you've had your fun, you've got your picture in the paper, now it's time to move on”... that sort of thing.
- Because this is roleplay, it can be necessary to get people out of their roles. If you think people are still carrying their emotions from their roles, deal with it by taking a break, playing an appropriate game, doing some grounding and breathing exercises or other similar technique (see *De-roleing* in the Resources section).
- Briefing one side of the line can be difficult without arousing the suspicion of the other side (who may then huddle and plan a response). You can get around this by briefing both sides in their respective group as to how to respond next time (ideally you will have a co-facilitator who briefs one side whilst you talk to the other), or by asking the protester line to stand in their lines and remain silent.
- Large groups and some venues (e.g. outside) can cause problems with people not being able to hear other people's contribution in the feedback sessions. You might need to repeat back contributions to

the group so that everyone can hear them.

- In a short workshop there may be no time for an action roleplay, so this may be your main experiential exercise providing space to put all the theory into practice and (briefly) to reflect on it. In this case you may need to give the hassle lines and debrief a little more prominence.
- We have had people get quite distressed in hassle lines, so it can be worth issuing a warning at the start of the session that you are intending for people to explore their emotion, and it might be a little uncomfortable. Remind them it's not compulsory, and that they can observe, but encourage them to participate on the grounds that it's better to discover these emotions in a safe space than on the streets. It can be useful to work with a co-facilitator who can attend to anyone who does find themselves overcome by emotion.
- If you're using any of the more dynamic scenarios, make sure that you have enough space. It's easy for people to step, or be pushed, backwards and end up falling over chairs and bags.

Variations:

Body & Voice Control: this is a formal introduction of some simple theory on using body language and voice control in confrontational situations. If you have enough time you can add this as an introduction or conclusion to your hassle lines. We find it works well if you add a little at a time in the debriefs between hassle line scenarios. Anyway, here's some notes that might help:

- Stepping forward into someone's personal space, making fists, waving hands in other people's personal 'space', tense facial expressions, tilting head to the side 'cockily', drawing one hip back sharply (a gesture that can be interpreted as the precursor to throwing a punch!) are all potentially aggressive gestures
- Stepping back, looking down & away, crossing arms and legs are all potentially defensive & submissive gestures