

## Unit Leadership Program Menu of Solutions Template

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Solution Title: The M&M Game: Learning to Resolve Conflict

Summary: To observe individual and team conflict resolution when resources are unequal.  
To acquaint the participants with conflict resolution strategies.  
To offer the participants an opportunity to experience and compare the effects and outcomes from different conflict-resolution strategies.

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Competency Link(s): Primary: Conflict Management  
Team Building  
Secondary: Self Awareness & Learning

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Solution Type: Training  Non Training Solution

Cost of Item: \$minimal (one pound package of M&Ms)

Time required to conduct: 60 minutes

Resources needed to conduct: Pfeiffer excerpt attached or something similar  
M&M candy, pencils and paper, flip chart, overhead projector with blank transparencies, felt-tip markers, masking tape, timer/stopwatch

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Is this item presented elsewhere in the Coast Guard (LAMS, CPOA, OCS, etc)?

Yes  No

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*The Pfeiffer Book of*  
**Successful  
Team-Building  
Tools**

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*Best of the Annuals*

**Elaine Biech, Editor**

**JOSSEY-BASS/PFEIFFER**  
A Wiley Company  
San Francisco

Published by

## JOSSEY-BASS/PFEIFFER

A Wiley Company  
989 Market Street  
San Francisco, CA 94103-1741  
415.433.1740; Fax 415.433.0499  
800.274.4434; Fax 800.569.0443

[www.pfeiffer.com](http://www.pfeiffer.com)

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ISBN:0-7879-5693-7

ISSN: 1534-5149

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Printed in the United States of America

Acquiring Editor: Matthew Holt  
Director of Development: Kathleen Dolan Davies  
Editor: Rebecca Taff  
Senior Production Editor: Dawn Kilgore  
Cover Design: Bruce Lundquist

Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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# THE M&M<sup>®</sup> GAME: LEARNING TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

*Gerald V. Miller*

## Goals

- To observe individual and team conflict resolution when resources are unequal.
- To acquaint the participants with conflict-resolution strategies.
- To offer the participants an opportunity to experience and compare the effects and outcomes from different conflict-resolution strategies.

## ***Group Size***

Twenty to thirty participants, as written, but could be played by any number.

## ***Time Required***

Approximately one hour.

## ***Materials***

- An M&M<sup>®</sup> Game Conflict-Resolution Lecturette Sheet for the facilitator.
- An M&M<sup>®</sup> Game Keys to Processing Sheet for the facilitator.
- One M&M<sup>®</sup> Game Goals and Rules overhead transparency.
- A one-pound package of M&M<sup>®</sup>s plain candy.
- One copy of the M&M<sup>®</sup> Game Conflict-Resolution Paired Discussion Sheet for each participant.
- A pencil or pen and paper for each participant.
- An overhead projector and blank transparencies.

- A flip chart and markers.
- An accurate timer or watch.

### ***Physical Setting***

A room large enough so that all participants can move freely around the room while negotiating conflict-resolution strategies with one another.

### ***Process***

1. Prior to the session, read the M&M<sup>®</sup> Conflict-Resolution Lecturette Sheet and develop a lecturette to present to participants. Make a copy of the M&M<sup>®</sup> Game Goals and Rules on an overhead transparency or on a flip chart, and read through the M&M<sup>®</sup> Game Keys to Processing Sheet to be sure you understand the nuances of the game and are prepared for the ensuing discussion.
2. After participants are seated, pass the bag of M&M<sup>®</sup>s around and instruct them to take three M&M<sup>®</sup>s each, but not to eat them. While the participants are passing the bag, introduce the topic of conflict resolution by giving a lecturette on the topic of conflict resolution from the M&M<sup>®</sup> Game Conflict-Resolution Lecturette Sheet.
3. Ask the following questions to encourage discussion, writing their answers on the flip chart:
  - How would you define conflict? (*Suggested response:* A state of disharmony between seemingly incompatible ideas or interests.)
  - What does the word “resolution” conjure up in your mind? (*Suggested response:* A course of action to solve a problem, a solution.)

Be sure to bring out that each person has a different style of dealing with conflict. Remind participants that all styles are appropriate to use at various times.

4. Display the M&M<sup>®</sup> Game Goals and Rules overhead transparency or flip chart and explain the game. Answer questions, but do not discuss strategy. Make sure that no one starts until you say, “Go!” Tell participants that you will be the time keeper, and that they will have five minutes to complete the game. Tell them to “go.” (Ten minutes.)
5. Give a one-minute warning. After five minutes, stop the game. Ask participants to return to their seats.
6. Use the following questions to process the activity.
  - What happened during the game?

- What techniques did you use or see others use to acquire M&M's?
- Did you consider joining forces with another participant? Why or why not?
- How might your strategy have changed if you had formed teams?
- How did you interpret the goal? How did the words "as possible" affect your working toward the goal?
- Did you try bargaining? Did it work? Why or why not?
- What would have been the result if everyone had collaborated? Would that have been a better result? Why or why not?

(Fifteen minutes.)

7. Give a copy of the M&M's® Game Conflict-Resolution Paired Discussion Sheet, paper, and a pen or pencil to each participant. Have them form pairs and find a quiet location to complete the questions together. (Twenty minutes.)
  8. When the pairs have finished, reconvene the large group and conclude with a discussion summarizing the activity, using these questions:
    - What did you learn about conflict and conflict resolution from doing this activity?
    - If you were to do this activity again, what would you do differently?
    - What did you learn from this activity about how you handle conflict?
    - How might you handle conflict differently in the future?
- (Ten minutes.)

### **Variations**

- This activity can be adapted to acquaint the participants with using bases of power.
- Instead of the discussions in pairs, role plays could be developed.

### **Suggested Readings**

- Blake, R.B., & Mouton, J.S. (1970). The fifth achievement. In *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 6(4), 413–426.
- Fisher R., & Ury, W. (1981). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. New York: Penguin.

- French, J.R.P., Jr., & Kruglanski, W. (1975). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power*. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.
- Hall, J. (1969). *Conflict management survey*. Houston, TX: Teleometrics.
- Hersey, P., Blanchard, K.H., & Natemeyer, W.E. (1979). *Situational leadership: Perception and the impact of power*. Escondido, CA: Leadership Studies.
- Karp, H.B., (1985). *Personal power: An unorthodox guide to success*. New York: AMACOM.
- Mauer, R. (1996). *Beyond the wall of resistance: Unconventional strategies that build support for change*. Austin, TX: Bard Books.
- Raven, B.H., & Kruglanski, W. (1975). Conflict and power. In P.G. Swingle (Ed.), *The structure of conflict*. New York: Academic Press.
- Robert, M. (1982). Conflict management style survey. In J.W. Pfeiffer & L.D. Goodstein (Eds.), *The 1982 annual for facilitators, trainers, and consultants*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.
- Thomas, K.W. (1967). Conflict and conflict management. In M. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (Vol. 2). New York: John Wiley.
- Thomas, K.W., & Kilmann, R.H. (1974). *Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument*. Tuxedo, NY: XICOM, Inc.
- Wiley, G.E. (1973). Win/lose situations. In J.E. Jones & J.W. Pfeiffer (Eds.), *The 1973 annual handbook for group facilitators*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

## **M&M® GAME CONFLICT-RESOLUTION LECTURETTE SHEET**

*Instructions:* Use the information below as a basis for introducing the topic of conflict resolution. You may give a lecturette directly from this sheet or add whatever material you desire.

### ***Conflict***

Conflict is one of the more potent of human interactions. It can either facilitate growth or bring harm to the people involved. Perhaps because of its potency, "conflict" has become a loaded word, carrying many negative connotations. There are many popular misconceptions of the meaning and purpose of conflict. People think of conflict as negative, but it may actually be positive and enhance one's strength, clarify one's purpose, or encourage action.

Conflict is a daily reality. Whether at home or at work, our needs and values continually and invariably come into opposition with those of others. Some conflicts are relatively minor, easy to handle, or capable of being overlooked. Others, however, require a strategy for successful resolution to avoid lasting enmity.

The ability to resolve conflict successfully is probably one of the most important skills that you can possess. Yet there are few formal opportunities to learn conflict-resolution skills. This experiential learning activity provides you with such an opportunity.

Like any other human skill, conflict resolution can be taught; like other skills, it consists of a number of important subskills, each separate and yet interdependent. These skills must be assimilated at the cognitive level. Ask yourself: Do I understand how conflict can be resolved? And also at the behavioral level: Can I resolve specific conflicts?

## M&M® GAME KEYS TO PROCESSING SHEET

### *Processing the Game*

1. A key point that will come up is that participants will not think in terms of forming teams to achieve their goals, but rather in terms of competition—leading to conflict. There will most likely be an assumption that the word “you” is singular, rather than plural. Be sure to discuss this point (making assumptions) thoroughly.
2. Another concept that is hard for participants to understand is that simply having the most of a certain color does not cause them to win. The goal is to “collect as many of the same color as possible.” Therefore, if an individual or team acquires four blue M&M<sup>®</sup>s and there are only four blue M&M<sup>®</sup>s available during the game, then they have met the goal. Brown is the predominate color in a bag of M&M<sup>®</sup>s. Individuals or teams collecting brown candies generally believe that they have won because they have the highest number. *This is only true if they have all the brown M&M<sup>®</sup>s that were out during the game.* This calls for a discussion of clarifying rules prior to forging ahead with a game.
3. Participants should also learn that when individuals or teams primarily use compromise or bargaining in this game, they cannot win because of the unequal distribution of the colors of M&M<sup>®</sup>s. With bargaining, one eventually has nothing to trade, if he or she does not possess the color the other person needs. The game can be won by an individual, but because of limited time and variation in color, one person would probably have to use sheer force of will to win.
4. Collaboration and team effort are needed to “win.” Teaming up on a particular color will ensure a win-win result. If everyone chooses collaboration to resolve the conflict, it is possible for many teams to win. It is also possible for the large group to collaborate, that is, to agree to share all the M&M<sup>®</sup>s and simply divide them by color category.
5. As stated above, it is possible for one individual to win the game by going for a particular color and using strong force of will on the other group members. However, that strategy will only work in the short term, as others will resent such behavior. The conflict will not be resolved, but probably will escalate.

## **M&M® GAME GOALS AND RULES**

### **Goal:**

In the next five minutes you are to collect as many of the same color M&M's as possible.

### **Rules:**

1. Do not start until I say, "Go!"
2. How you achieve the goal is up to you.
3. Do no bodily harm!
4. You may only use the M&M's that are out at this time.

## M&M® GAME CONFLICT-RESOLUTION PAIRED DISCUSSION SHEET

*Instructions:* Spend twenty minutes with your partner discussing the following and writing down your answers:

1. List words that describe how you deal with conflict. for example, collaborate, submit, accommodate others' needs, persuade, force, fight, flee, compete, avoid, bargain, compromise:

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2. What do these words tell you about your conflict-resolution style?

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3. What insights or learnings about your conflict-resolution style did you have during the activity?

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4. Which of these insights is potentially the most useful to you in the future? Why?

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5. As a result of your key discoveries, what will you:

- Continue doing?

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- Start doing?

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- Stop doing?

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