

Mattress Game

A training tool to teach nonviolent theory

Purposes: To clarify the principle that ruling authority depends on the cooperation of the people, and noncooperation is therefore powerful

Materials: one mattress (bunk, twin, or regular)

Time: 30-45 minutes

How to lead:

1. Explain that this game explores power dynamics. Connect to previous ideas in the workshop if appropriate. Ask: "What are the forms of support that a system needs to exist?" List on newsprint. If some are forgotten (especially the army, police, international finance, citizen obedience), add them.
2. Ask pairs (or threes or more if large group) to select a form of support. They will get to represent that form of support in the game. Ask participants to raise their hands to indicate which ones identify with which support, to clarify before the next step.
3. Explain that the pairs/threes will soon get together to discuss what nonviolent action(s) would effectively eliminate their support for the system. For example, what actions could the civil servants take to eliminate their carrying out system functioning? Each group will send one of their number to the center to represent them. Give them 3-5 minutes to work in small groups.
4. Bring the mattress to the center and explain that it symbolizes the system. Ask for the representatives from the twos/threes to raise the mattress together, each using one hand.
5. Ask the partners remaining on the sidelines to come to the center (one team at a time), announce loudly their actions, and take away their representative. Do not allow dialogue, challenging, etc.; a simple declaration and making off with their representative is sufficient. Gradually the mattress becomes shakier and shakier, until it finally falls to the ground.
6. Enjoy the moment. De-brief the activity by asking questions such as:
 - ◆ How did it feel to see the mattress getting shakier?
 - ◆ Do systems really depend on the cooperation/ compliance of these forces?
 - ◆ Was the order in which groups noncooperated a realistic order?
 - ◆ Which groups might hang on until the end?
 - ◆ Are there ways of intervening which reduce the level of support even of groups still loyal to the regime?
7. Encourage participants to give examples from past struggles, and supply examples yourself. An effective way to end the exercise is quickly to recite a list of countries which have fallen to nonviolent noncooperation. A hand-out of this sort can be derived from Gene Sharp's work, especially *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*.

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