

Do Differences Divide Us?

Learning About Diversity

Activity Summary

A quick activity to learn about the value of diversity within organizations.

Goals

- To experience how differences divide us.
- To provide an energetic diversity training experience within an organization.

Group Size

5 to 50 participants from the same organization or as many as the room will allow to stand and move around at the same time.

Time Required

30 minutes.

Materials

None.

Physical Setting

Tables and chairs for initial seating. A room large enough for circulation of all participants from wall to wall.

Facilitating Risk Rating

Moderate.

Process

1. Explain to participants that they are going to look together at some ways in which they are different.
2. If people are seated, ask them to stand and put down purses, drinks, and papers.
3. Explain that you will be calling out a series of categories and asking them to sort themselves by moving to the certain section of the room (opposite sides, corners) that you designate.
4. Begin calling out categories, allowing enough time for participants to settle into groups and look at the others in their groups, and then calling out the next category:
 - Men on one side, women on the other.
 - Single, married.
 - Have children, no children.
 - Republican, Democrat, Independent, no affiliation.
 - Hair has been altered versus all-natural hair.
 - Feel you are overweight, underweight, or just right.
 - Have committed a crime (could be speeding) or not.
 - You or someone close to you has been in rehab.
 - You or someone close to you has been a victim of abuse.
 - You or someone close to you has financial problems.
 - Have worked at this organization longer than [some period of years] or less than [some period of years] or is brand new.
 - Believe in a higher power or do not.
 - Want to love and be loved or do not.
 - Want to find joy and meaning in work or do not.

(10 minutes.)
5. The room should be tilted in one direction at the end of the exercise with the last category. Ask participants to be seated and to quietly reflect on what just happened.

6. Then in pairs or as a whole group, discuss these questions:

- Did some of these differences ever make you feel uncomfortable or even embarrassed?
- Did you ever feel like the outsider?
- Did you ever feel inferior—that your status was less than the others?
- Did you ever change places, that is, not move to the appropriate category, in order to avoid others' judgments?
- Imagine coming to work feeling the weight of a label and a judgment that goes with it. Do we want this kind of discomfort in our workplace?
- Are we more alike or are we really very different?

(10 minutes.)

7. Conclude with these comments:

"We steered away from questions of race, ethnicity, religion, culture, or family background, but the conclusions that we could draw are the same.

"All around the world, people want the same things: to have a place, to be connected to something more important than themselves, to be loved, to have peace and stability in their communities, to see their children prosper, and to maintain a respect for life and a sense of fairness.

"It is not the differences that divide us; it is our judgments about others that do. Consider this experience the next time you are tempted to stereotype others.

"In our organization, we are seeking to build 'cultural competence'—the ability to understand and capitalize on our differences while we recognize and celebrate our commonalities."

Variation

Individuals can raise their hands rather than vote with their feet—or stand in a large circle, stepping in or backing out in response to questions.

Submitted by M.K. Key.

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