



Experiential Activities for Diversity Training

by Lee Gardenswartz, Ph.D. and Anita Rowe, Ph.D.

Most of us doing diversity training would probably agree that dealing with diversity is an 'inside job' and that experiential learning is a particularly helpful vehicle for reaching that inside. We're sometimes limited in our thinking about experiential learning, though. The now famous Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes experiment of Bafa Bafa are examples of one kind of structured experience designed to create an impactful 'ah ha.' However, there are far more types of activities which involve diversity session participants in new experiences from which they can extract learning.

To maximize the usefulness of the entire range of experiential techniques, it is important to recognize the different learning objectives at each level of diversity training—awareness building, knowledge acquisition, and skill development. Different types of learning experiences are appropriate for each level. Matching activity with objective is critical to effective training.

At the awareness level, the essential issue is coming to terms with differences. The objectives of training include the recognition of assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices; coming to terms with attitudes about differences; and developing empathy for others. Structured experiences which give individuals a sense of what it's like to be an outsider or the object of prejudice are helpful at this level. 'Bamga' as well as the two structured experiences already mentioned are examples of the kinds of light bulb producing activities in which a dawning occurs. They are designed to hit the learner at the affective as well as cognitive levels.

The second area of diversity learning, gaining knowledge, is a more cognitive realm and different kinds of experiences are called for. One example of learning that falls under the knowledge umbrella is finding out about other cultural norms, practices and values. This learning does not have to be a lecturette only operation. Having participants become 'cultural Sherlock Holmes' and investigate norms of different groups, asking them to interview individuals from another group, or having them view a film set in another culture can be an involving way for them to learn.

In the final area of diversity training, the skills aspect, still other activities are helpful. Diversity skills such as giving feedback without causing loss of face or resolving conflict in culturally sensitive ways need to be practiced. One of the most effective tools at this level is role play where participants learn a method, then practice it in a structured situation, get feedback on their performance and finally apply the skill to their real life job role. Case studies in which learners deal with problem situations are also helpful in skill development.

Involving participants and drawing the learning out of them, a critical tenet in any

effective training, is even more important when dealing with an issue as deep and emotionally charged as diversity. In order to maximize the effectiveness of those learning experiences, it is important to be clear about the objectives of the training and then structure learning experiences that suit those objectives. Finally, remember that in the most fundamental sense, all learning is experiential because it involves the learner in exploring new territory. Here's to creating fruitful, exciting, and impactful adventures for your trainees.

© Copyright 2016 Gardenswartz and Rowe. All Rights Reserved.