

Activity 19

EYE CONTACT

Purpose

- ◆ To help participants explore the impact of different value systems on behavior and expectations.
- ◆ To introduce participants to the concepts of individualistic and collectivistic value systems and ethnocentrism.

Special Note

Avoid referring to this as the “Eye Contact” activity, because that title would prematurely disclose the key learning.

When to Use

At any time in a session.

Group Size

Unlimited.

Time Required

Fifteen to thirty minutes.

Materials

Overheads, projector, and screen. *Note:* Overhead or chart masters are included in the lecturettes *Ethnocentrism* and *Individualistic and Collectivistic Value Systems*.

Physical Setting

Space for pairs of participants to stand and discuss.

Handouts

Ethnocentrism or Individualistic and Collectivistic Value Systems (lecturettes).

Instructions

1. Announce the purpose and give a brief overview of the activity. Say something like "What I would like to do is give you a chance to explore some of our mainstream values, especially our ethnocentrism, so you can discover how they impact the way you perceive and respond to others."
2. Divide the group equally into subgroups A and B. If there is an uneven number, ask that person to observe. Ask subgroups to go to different portions of the room, so that instructions can be given privately to each.
3. Meet first with subgroup A, the Storytellers, and give them the following instructions:

"Think of a brief (one-minute) story. It can be personal or business related. You will share your story with a partner in Group B. I am now going to give you some time to think about your stories."
4. Then meet with subgroup B, the Listeners, and give them the following instructions:

"A partner in Group A is going to share an experience with you. Listen attentively. Ask questions, give nonverbal indications, such as nodding your head, that you are listening and interested, but *do not make any direct eye contact* with your partner. Your partner does not know your instructions. Note how your partner is responding and how you are responding."

Demonstrate the instructions by looking over someone's shoulder or staring down at the floor as that person speaks.
5. Ask each member of subgroup A to find a partner from subgroup B and do as they have been instructed. Encourage participants to stand rather than sit during the storytelling.
6. Reconvene the total group and facilitate a discussion by first asking the following question to members of subgroup A: "How do you rate—on a scale of one to ten, with ten being highest—the attentiveness and interest of your partner?" If anyone responds with a rating of less than ten, ask that person, "Why not ten?" Focus on and probe for expressions of discomfort due to the lack of direct eye contact. Focus on Group A members who are negative about the interaction. (Five to ten minutes.)

Then ask subgroup B, "What were your instructions?" (Answer: Listen, but have no direct eye contact.) Ask Group B members how it felt to have no direct eye contact with the person who was talking. If there is an observer, get his or her feedback. (Five minutes.)

7. Again divide the total group into subgroups, this time in subgroups of three; their previous subgroup has no bearing on the membership in the new grouping. Ask each subgroup to discuss "Why direct eye contact is so important." (Five minutes.)
8. Reconvene the total group and ask each subgroup to report on its discussion. (Five minutes.)
9. Summarize by making the following points:
 - ◆ The *behavior of eye contact* is tied to the *value of directness*. Attached to directness are sincerity, honesty, and initiative. Therefore, if someone is being direct, he or she is also honest and sincere and shows initiative. Even if the partners of Group A members were asking questions, nodding their heads, and saying "yes," the members of Group A probably had something going on in their minds. They might have felt that their partners were not really paying attention. They made judgments based on a single behavior—or lack of one.
 - ◆ Nevertheless, there are different values in other parts of the world. In two-thirds of the world, if you are my superior and I hold prolonged, direct eye contact with you, it is considered very disrespectful. This is important to us because of the increasing number of immigrants in the workplace.
 - ◆ If I am a Hispanic female from South or Central America and I have prolonged, direct eye contact with a male, that is considered flirtatious.
 - ◆ We are constantly interpreting, evaluating, and judging the behavior of others. The basis for these decisions is our own cultural value system. It is really important that we see ethnocentrism as something that limits our understanding and perspective of others. Ethnocentrism is "the belief that only one's own culture makes sense, espouses the right values, and represents the right and logical way to behave." All behavior makes sense if we understand the context and values of the person(s) exhibiting the behaviors.
10. Present and/or distribute the lecturette *Ethnocentrism or Individualistic and Collectivistic Value Systems*. (Ten minutes if presenting it.)
11. Close by reviewing the activity purpose.

Acknowledgment

The author gratefully acknowledges Pacific Resources Education Programs, Inc. (PREP), San Francisco, CA, (415) 397-1937, for permission to adapt this material.

