

What Is It? What Is It For?

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Purpose and learning objectives

- To simulate the difficulty in understanding elements of culture, such as words, legal or financial concepts, etiquette, negotiation techniques, etc., when they are taken out of context
- To encourage participants to question their assumptions when working with individuals from other cultures
- To encourage participants to consider the possibility that others see the world differently than they do, and that this will influence the communication process

Target audience

Those who need to interact effectively in an unfamiliar culture or with members of another culture; 1 to 25 participants.

Time

30 minutes

Materials

- A few numbered objects that are difficult to identify, such as a wooden ravioli maker, a netsuke, an antimony bottle, a chopstick rest, a sari, part of a crack pipe made from an auto antenna, a Pakistani bodkin, etc.
- “What Is It? What Is It For?” handouts for each person, or a flipchart with the same information.

Procedure

1. Place the numbered objects on a table within reach of all.
2. Announce that you are going to play a game. Ask the participants to turn to their handout entitled “What Is It? What Is It For?” and, pen in hand, come up and take a look at the numbered objects on the table. If they know what the object is and what it’s for, they should write this down on paper or a flipchart page. If they don’t know what the object is or what it’s for, they should make up a name and a function, and write these down. Ask them to work independently; reassure them that they will get to share their ideas later.
3. Invite the participants to investigate the items and make notes.

4. When all participants have returned to their seats, ask them to share their emotions associated with the experience. Some of the possible emotions mentioned might be:
 - curious
 - frustrated
 - inadequate (because they didn't know what the objects were)

Relate these emotions back to the experience of what it is like to try to figure out what concepts are or mean in a new environment—if they don't know what something is or what it's for, they are likely to guess, just as the participants did during the game. Tell the participants you wanted to see how good they were at guessing.

Tell them you want to hear from those who were baffled by an object first; those who knew what the object was can speak later.

One-by-one, go through the objects, eliminating the wild guesses first and then explaining the real name and function of each object.

Debrief

When you are finished explaining the objects, relate the simulation to intercultural experiences: "When a person first encounters a new culture, she or he is being asked to answer a question or make a decision about one little piece of a culture, just as you were asked to do during the game. As you experienced, it can be very difficult to come to accurate conclusions when one is operating out of context."

On the basis of this experience, urge the participants to provide as much contextual information as possible when working with people new to the culture, and to "describe" a situation fully before they "ascribe" meaning to the situation. Also, urge the participants to be aware that the assumptions they hold regarding some of the questions in their intercultural encounters—what "yes" means, what are good business practices, how we define family, etc., can differ from the beliefs held by the people of the culture. It is always useful to test those assumptions.

[Handout 1]

What Is It? What Is It For?

Use the space below to write down what you think each object is and what it is used for. Take your best guess and do not skip any.

1.

2.

3.

4.

Reproduced from *Global Competence: 50 training activities for succeeding in international business*,
Jonamay Lambert, Selma Myers and George Simons, Editors, Amherst, Mass.: HRD Press, 2000.

Part II — Culture-General Activities

Section C. Time

Perhaps no area of intercultural interaction is as frustrating as the differing ways in which people from different cultures perceive and use time. What we consider to be “enough time” and “the right time” are often taken from attitudes and values that are often radically different from those with whom we are doing business or interacting socially—attitudes that we are usually unaware of.

It is the purpose of the activities in this section to bring these unconscious values concerning time to the surface and help us develop more awareness and flexibility. On one hand, this will keep us from making tragic mistakes. On the other hand, it will help us to begin to synchronize our interactions and activities in ways that result in synergy, satisfying relationships, and appropriate results for all involved.

