

Introduction:

This exercise can build empathy and lead to better decision making by highlighting: 1. The need to have people from diverse backgrounds in the room where decisions are being made. 2. The need to learn how to consider diverse perspectives to better inform one's decisions.

Background Information:

David Livermore (2016) blogged about the empty chair that Jeff Bezos, Amazon founder, always leaves at meetings to remind his colleagues about the most important person in the room that they should keep squarely in mind: the customer. But Livermore encourages businesspeople to go a step further and consider culture when figuratively filling that empty customer chair. He wants you thinking about customers who differ from you in their values and perspectives; to imagine customers who may *not* be motivated by what motivates you.

At the heart of what Livermore is asking you to do is to engage in **diverse perspective-taking**, i.e., to think about multiple types of persons' points of view different from your own and to try walking in their shoes. Practicing perspective-taking is critical for learning how to be a global engineer. It is critical if you want to make decisions that are inclusive (Todd et al., 2012).

Further, practice is important because people are generally cognitive misers. Just as a miserly person holds tightly onto their money, so we hold tightly onto our cognitive resources. This tendency to be miserly means that we don't exercise our brains when we don't really have the resources and/or motivation to do so. For example, in an important meeting where the stakes are high, we may not have the cognitive capacity to perspective-take; unless, of course, we practice it.

What we need to do, therefore, is to make diverse perspective-taking a part of our everyday decision-making process. And we need to "up" our motivation for engaging in it to help counter our inclination to fill the chair with customers "just like us" (i.e., falling prey to the similarity bias). To practice diverse perspective-taking with a "fun" activity, begin with the following exercise that I call "Filling the Diversity Chair."

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Practice perspective-taking to be more inclusive.

Activity Elements:

Duration:

Although you can speed up or slow down this exercise, 45 minutes is a good amount of time to: 1. Draw and explain what you are doing to diversify the chair. 2. Listen to the other's "take" on diversifying the chair. 3. Think about other measures that could help you perspective-take. 4. Discuss it as a larger group so several ideas are put in the room that you could try.

Group Size:

This exercise can be adapted for all group sizes. If a small group, each person can work alone to

"diversify the chair," whereas if the group is larger, it works to have pairs or a small group of three. It has been successfully used for: 1. High school students 2. College students 3. MBA students.

Materials:

Paper and pen/pencil for each participant; Participant Instructions (in [Downloads](#)).

Other Recommendations:

This is an exercise that makes a lot of people either happy or anxious. It takes a little while for them to warm up to doing something, especially if they are drawing in public, i.e., on a chalkboard. You can decide for yourself what would be most effective for your audience.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

Openness

- To initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others.
- To suspend judgment in valuing interactions with culturally different others.

Other Skills:

Mentorship & Leadership; Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion.

Activity Instructions:

Experience: Filling the Diversity Chair:

It helps to have visual reminders to practice diverse perspective-taking. An empty chair, alone, is not enough of a cue because we would think about, and fill the chair with, customers similar to ourselves.

- Think of an easy solution first: *diversify the chair*. Each of you, imagine **how to make the chair a reminder to think of diverse customers**. Write down what you'd do and draw the diversified chair.
- After five minutes to be creative (or once everyone is done), present to the group what you were thinking about and show the chair. Describe how it is "inclusive" and how it helps you think about diverse others.

Reflection:

After each group presents their chair, have the groups reflect on how their chair was similar or

dissimilar to the chairs imagined by the other groups. What does this say about other perspective-taking?

Go beyond thinking about a specific chair. Think about your study or workplaces. What else could you do and/or what other measures could you put in place, to serve as a reminder to make decisions and conduct everyday business with diversity and inclusion in mind? Discuss as a group.

What might you now intend to do? Can you come up with a group action plan?

Debriefing:

Have the group discuss what it was like to do this activity. Did they find it uncomfortable? Were their ideas included in the group's concept of a chair? Was everyone in the group able to use the chair analogy to generalize to the larger issues of making the whole of the workplace or study place inclusive?

References:

Todd, A. R., Bodenhausen, G. V., & Galinsky, A. D. (2012). Perspective taking combats the denial of intergroup discrimination. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48*(3), 738-745.

Livermore, D. (2016, January 18). *New book on culturally intelligent innovation*.

DavidLivermore.com. <https://davidlivermore.com/2016/01/18/new-book-on-culturally-intelligent-innovation/>