

Introduction:

Perceived power and status of ourselves and those around us affect our interactions on multiple levels, impacting conversation topics, breadth and depth of conversations, communication initiation behaviors, nonverbal behaviors, comfort levels, uncertainty avoidance behaviors, and interaction satisfaction levels. We learn different rules about power and status and their roles in interaction situations from our cultural backgrounds. This activity prompts participants to consider the roles of power and status in interaction and to critically analyze the communicative impact of perceived power and status differences. This is a simple activity to do but can often engage participants on intense levels. It is a useful activity to use when introducing power distance as a cultural dimension.

Objectives:

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

1. Recognize and articulate the ways power distance impacts communication.

Time:

45 minutes.

Group Size:

Small group.

Materials:

Playing cards (one card per participant).

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Minimization
- Acceptance
- Adaptation

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Cultural Self-Awareness

- To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

- To articulate a complex understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g., demonstrates understanding of the degree to which people use physical contact while communicating in different cultures or use direct/indirect and explicit/implicit meanings).
- To skillfully negotiate a shared understanding based on these differences.

Other Skills:

Mentorship & Leadership; Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion.

Activity Instructions:

1. All participants should come to an open space, where there is enough space to move about comfortably. Tell the participants that they are all employees of a particular company (you can adapt this context to fit your needs) and that they are all attending the end of the year company picnic to celebrate their successful business year. You may have the group come up with the type of company they'd like to be (there is lots of room for creativity here!) and a company name. Inform them that they will have the opportunity to walk around and chat with their fellow employees (about company news or whatever else they'd like to talk about – this is a social gathering after all!).
2. Prior to their conversations, however, ask each employee to draw a card from the deck, indicating the person's status in the company. Once drawn, participants should not look at their own cards, but rather hold them facing out on their foreheads. This allows everyone else to see the person's card except the person whose card it is. Tell participants that their status is indicated by their cards, with ace being highest (CEO) and face cards (jacks, queens, kings) indicating top executive positions. Cards with 2s, 3s, and 4s indicate the lowest status jobs in the company (night custodial staff, mailroom worker, etc.).
3. Instruct participants to simply walk around (holding their cards on their foreheads) and to interact with other participants as they think the cards indicate they should be treated. Suggest that participants make an effort to remember the other participants' status as they interact, yet also be somewhat discreet about the other person's status just as they would in real life situations (for example, most people would not go up to the mailroom guy and say, "So...what is it like down there in the basement year after year??"). Participants should interact with one another for about 15 minutes.
4. Instruct participants to line up in the order in which they think they belong without looking at their own cards. Each participant should find his or her own place in line, without prompting from the others. Once all participants are lined up, tell them to look at their cards and beginning with the low end of the line, have participants read their cards out loud for the group.
5. Debrief the activity, asking participants to interact with the following questions:
 - What did you see? Think? Feel?
 - How did you figure out where to stand in line at the end of the picnic/party?
 - How were you treated? How did you treat others? How did not knowing your own status (at least initially) affect your interaction with others? Did discovering your status change your behaviors?



- How does status affect how we communicate with one another, verbally and nonverbally?
- What emotional and behavioral reactions did you experience and observe during the activity?
- Discuss your perceptions of power and power difference and the role of power cross-culturally.
- How does this activity relate to some of your own personal and professional experiences?
- Consider this activity in a more (or less) mono-cultural setting, diverse cultural context, etc.