

Power Distance Company Picnic

What is it?

An activity that involves participant interaction based on assigned power and status differences.

What materials do you need?

Playing cards (one card per participant)

Why do you do it?

The perceived power and status of ourselves and those around us affect our interactions on multiple levels: 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.

What is the process?

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 with 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 out - this is a social gathering after all!

Prior to their conversations, however, each employee will draw a card, 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 high (CEO) and face cards indicating top executive positions.

Cards with 2s, 3s, and 4s indicate the lowest status jobs in the company (e.g., night custodial staff, mailroom worker, etc.).

Instruct participants to walk around holding their cards on their foreheads and to interact with the others 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 discrete 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 interact with one another for about 15 minutes, then are instructed to line up in the order in which they think they belong WITHOUT looking at their cards. Each participant should find his or 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.

Discuss the following ideas as a large group:

*General reactions to the activity...What did you see?...think?...feel?

*How did you figure out where to stand in line at the end of the picnic?

*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?

*Discuss your perceptions of power and power difference and the role of power cross-culturally.

*How does this activity relate to some of your "real-life" experiences?

Please note: Be prepared! This activity can get intense and may stir up participants' emotions.

*Source: Basma Ibrahim DeVries and Barbara Kappa, More Tools, More Fun!
SIETAR-USA 2003 Pre-conference Workshop, Austin, Texas; presented by Alice
Wu, Susan Bender and Darla Deardorff at Toolbox for Intercultural Interactions,
NAFSA 2005, Seattle, WA*