

The Mystery Squares Exercise

Overview

This is a brief human relations exercise that has some special rules. In the exercise, groups of five participants, with one or more observers, are asked to complete a task - that of assembling five equal-sized squares, one per participant. With the special rules of no talking or other non-verbal communication and not allowing participants to take or ask for puzzle pieces, the participants are put in a high pressure situation similar to early experiences in a new culture. The actual activity can take less than twenty minutes.

Directions for making the puzzles for this exercise and directions for conducting it are included in this handout. The exercise has multiple applications, not limited to intercultural sensitivity training. It has been used to develop group work skills, general leadership skills, personality styles, etc.

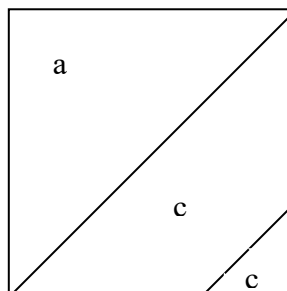
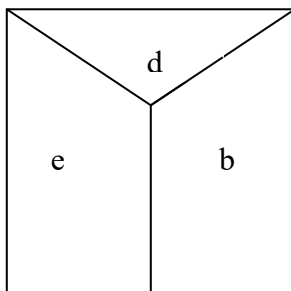
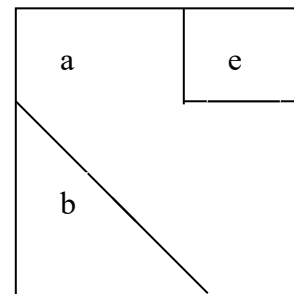
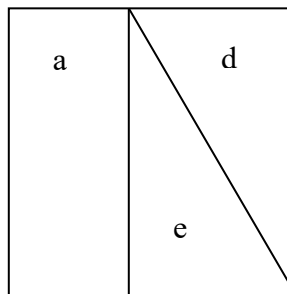
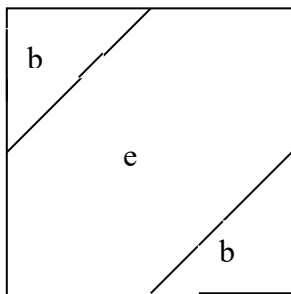
A useful way to do the discussion after is to ask how the exercise might be reflective of collaborative problem solving groups. Points brought out often include:

1. Difficulty with language
2. Having to take the initiative
3. Paying close attention to what other people are doing
4. Finding something that initially seemed easy being actually very hard
5. Coming to an impasse and wanting to give up
6. Breaking rules that seem pointless
7. Feeling lost

The list can go on and on. It is often most effective to bring out the learning points in a discussion, then have people give examples from their own or others' experiences. Finally, it can be tied in with various theories or models, such as the typical stages of culture shock.

Directions for Creating the Puzzles

1. Use cardboard or thick poster paper, so the puzzles will last through many uses, and enthusiastic assembly. The object is to assemble five squares, with six-inch sides. The diagram below shows both how to cut the puzzles into parts, and how they should be assembled correctly.
2. The puzzles are not labeled. The pieces are put into five envelopes labeled "A" through "E", and small letters are written on each piece that goes in each envelope. In other words, the letters on the pieces have nothing to do with how to assemble the puzzles, they just tell you which envelope to put them in to start the exercise, and which envelopes to put them in after the group correctly assembles them.



Five people play the game for each set of puzzles. Ideally, there are seven in each group, so that two people are observers/judges. These two can often tell what was happening in the group when the group members were too caught up in the action to notice. Several groups can play simultaneously. It is essential to have observers if there are several groups. The leader cannot keep up with all of this – because it often goes very fast. If there are multiple groups, it will also become clear that some groups get it faster than others. If one or more groups get stuck, it is also ok to have them get up and look at successful squares (without talking). A learning point from this is that we can learn from others who have successfully done something – like crossing cultures.

Participant Directions

In each envelope there are puzzle pieces which will form squares. When the facilitator indicates it is time to begin, the task for the group is to assemble five squares of equal size. The task is completed when each person has a square of the same size as everyone else's in front of him/her.

There are special rules of conduct for the exercise:

1. No one may speak.
2. No one may gesture, or attempt any other form of verbal or non-verbal communication, to signal that another person is to give him/her a puzzle piece.
In other words, no one may in any way ask for a piece.
3. Anyone may give away any number of pieces, any number of times.

Observer Directions

Your job is twofold. First to enforce the rules and second to observe what happens. If someone violates a rule, simply point out to them that what they have done is against the rules. As an observer, you might want to look for things like:

1. What was the emotional tone of the group, or of specific individuals?

How did this change as the exercise progressed?

2. What strategies, if any did individuals seem to take?
3. Who took a leadership role? What did they do?
4. How did the group deal with frustration?
5. Was there a turning point, or points? What happened?
6. Who was the first to give away pieces?
7. If the group didn't finish, how did they get stuck?
8. What other observations do you have about how the exercise went?