



50

Activities for Promoting Communication  
and Understanding at Work

# Book The Diversity Training Activity Book

## 50 Activities for Promoting Communication and Understanding at Work

Jonamay Lambert and Selma Myers

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## Recommendation

The modern workforce is multicultural, multigenerational and more diverse than any previous labor pool. This detailed activity book helps trainers teach employees how to approach diversity issues with empathy, sensitivity and understanding. Its exercises, designed by seasoned diversity trainers Jonamay Lambert and Selma Myers, can help promote awareness, improve communication, break down stereotypes, correct misconceptions and resolve conflicts. The authors, who assume that readers already have some experience as trainers, provide 50 discussions and activities that facilitators can use to help employees and managers deal properly with differences in ethnicity, gender, race and more. Using the provided lectures, questionnaires, handouts, discussions and role-playing exercises, trainers can help participants understand and work with cultural differences. *BooksInShort* recommends this hands-on workbook to human resources directors, coaches, teachers and trainers in all kinds of organizations.

## Take-Aways

- The 21st-century labor pool is the most diverse in U.S. history.
- Trainers can use diversity-awareness activities to help employees adjust to the changing workforce.
- “Culture is not good or bad. It just ‘is’.”
- Many North Americans operate under incorrect assumptions about other cultures.
- People often feel uncomfortable with behaviors that seem different and unfamiliar.
- However, everyone can relate to feeling different. Use that understanding to build sensitivity toward people from other backgrounds.
- People who know their own cultures are better at managing diversity issues.
- Workshop activities can help people develop sensitivity, improve their communication skills and resolve conflicts.
- Business culture is male-oriented, which puts women at a disadvantage.
- Be sure that you think through and understand the connection between your values and your career decisions.

## Summary

### Cultural Variety

Members of the 21st-century workforce come from a huge variety of cultures and backgrounds. Trainers can help employees adjust to this unprecedented level of diversity by using specific activities designed for that purpose. Begin with exercises that promote employees’ awareness of their own backgrounds and that demonstrate how their cultures influence their behavior. Use such activities to facilitate discussions about diversity, stereotypes and expectations. Empower employees with

techniques and strategies they can use to maneuver successfully within a multicultural workplace.

“Diversity is much broader than race and gender...the challenge is to learn how diversity impacts everyone, everywhere.”

These diversity-training activities share several ultimate goals, including enhancing communication, promoting mutually beneficial relationships, and avoiding or resolving conflicts. These training exercises are based on several tenets:

- “Culture is not good or bad. It just ‘is’.”
- “Often what may be considered ‘just the way it is’ is culturally influenced.”
- “Values, perceptions, assumptions and expectations” shape each person’s worldview.
- “The more people know about their own culture, and the more they know about others’ cultures, the better they will communicate with each other.”
- “Being different is ‘OK’ [and] can be recognized, acknowledged and cherished.”

## “The Times, They Are a-Changin’”

Working people face tremendous challenges in a multicultural environment. Language differences can make accurate, effective communication very difficult. People may feel uncomfortable with behaviors that seem unfamiliar, and such discomfort can lead to unfair biases. Many North Americans operate under incorrect assumptions about other cultures, such as thinking that some groups are lazy or unmotivated. They expect people from other cultures to conform to their ways, and some American manners inadvertently incur suspicion and mistrust. Training about diversity can help ease many of these issues.

“Dealing with a diverse workforce requires special knowledge and sensitivity.”

Several recent trends have increased workplace diversity, including the “shrinking” and aging of the workforce, the growing number of women in leadership positions, more immigrants in the labor pool, the demand for employees with “higher skill levels” and the burgeoning population of minority employees, a group likely to replace retiring baby boomers. Trainers, instructors, teachers, facilitators and coaches can use planned, hands-on activities to help people adapt to workplace diversity. Here are a few of those exercises:

## “Diversity Icebreakers”

These activities are a fun way to introduce participants to the subject of diversity and to each other. Icebreakers allow participants the time and opportunity to warm up and become receptive to learning. Icebreakers include:

- **“Name that feeling”** – This activity will help individual participants relate to feeling different from everyone else. Ask them to close their eyes. Have each person remember a time that he or she experienced a sense of being an oddball. Ask each one to assign a word to describe that feeling. Then, have people introduce themselves to everyone in the room using the word they’ve chosen as their name. For example, a person might introduce himself or herself as “Ostracized.” Then, discuss the experience and the participants’ reactions. Conclude the session by explaining that everyone can relate to feeling different and that those who participated can now use the experience to build their sensitivity toward people from other backgrounds.
- **“Diversity letter game”** – In this activity, participants define what diversity means to them. On a flipchart, write the words “Diversity Game” vertically on the left side of the sheet. Ask the participants to work in pairs. Have every team write words that define diversity and that begin with each of the letters in the words “diversity game.” For example, for the letter *D*, they might come up with such words as “different,” “distinctive” or “disability.” Reconvene in a large group, write the participants’ suggestions on the flipchart and discuss each word they’ve proposed to describe diversity. Summarize your findings. Note that diversity has many meanings and affects everyone.

## “Culture and Diversity”

After the icebreaking activities, embark on various exercises that help create awareness about cultural differences. As people become more cognizant of the elements that make up their own cultures, they also become more adept at working with a broad array of people.

“Everyone carries his or her own baggage, no matter what the culture.”

The main categories where cultural differences come into play are: “language and communication, appearance and dress, food and eating habits, time and time-consciousness, rewards and recognition, roles and responsibilities, values and norms, sense of self and of space, mental processes and learning styles,” and “beliefs, values and attitudes.” These activities address such cultural differences in order to build understanding and communication:

- **“Understanding the impact of culture on work”** – In this activity, participants define the concept of culture and describe how it influences behavior. Record their definitions on a flipchart. Then, offer a mini-lecture covering “what culture means.” You might cite the dictionary definition of culture and then explore the ways that culture affects every aspect of human behavior. Divide participants into small groups and have individuals describe their cultural backgrounds. Reconvene as a large group and talk about the topics that arose in the small-group meetings. Conclude the session by pointing out ways that organizations require employees to conform to their behavioral expectations.
- **“Ups and downs”** – This activity demonstrates that people can belong to many different groups. First, announce the names of various groups. Ask participants to stand when you call the name of a group they belong to, such as “women,” “smokers” or “people who are technologically savvy.” Conclude by explaining that people can belong to various groups simultaneously and that one group is not necessarily better than another. Irish Quakers who were dealing with “identity and conflict resolution” issues originated this exercise in Ireland.
- **“Addressing language barriers”** – This exercise shows participants how hard it is to learn a second language and gives them ways to communicate more productively with those who haven’t fully mastered their language. Explain that many personal details influence someone’s ability to acquire a new language, from age and “cultural knowledge,” to “motivation,” “personality” and how much the new language differs from a familiar language. Have breakout groups discuss language barriers they have encountered and then share those experiences with the whole group. Teach tactics for better communication with those who do not

“speak your language fluently, including conveying just one primary thought, using a clear tone, exercising patience, watching for “nonverbal cues” and adhering to “consistent terminology.”

## “Change, Communication and Conflict Resolution”

These exercises introduce participants to the skills they need to manage diversity issues. They will learn how to respond appropriately to circumstances brought about by differences in “race, gender, age, sexual orientation, national origin, physical abilities, etc.” These activities will help participants develop sensitivity, improve their communication skills and resolve conflicts:

- **“Introduction to listening: a self-inventory”** – This activity emphasizes the importance of listening skills. Engage participants with discussion questions about listening well. Ask them to record and combine their answers on a flipchart. Have people recount experiences when poor communication created a problem. Ask if they communicate differently with people from other backgrounds. If they do, analyze how their behavior changes. Use questions that help them define their listening styles, such as, “Do you generally talk more than listen?” “When listening to someone who speaks with an accent, do you make a greater effort to concentrate?” And, “Do you listen for the feelings behind the facts?” Provide useful hints on improving listening skills, including, “Give the speaker your full attention,” “Be aware of your own biases and how they may interfere with your ability to listen,” and “Communication styles differ.” Note that listening is a learned skill requiring effort and practice.
- **“Self-talk”** – The voice in your head tremendously influences how you feel about yourself. If your self-talk is negative, you will feel bad. Research shows that your brain will believe what you tell yourself, even if it is not accurate. This self-talk activity helps people recognize negative self-talk and provides techniques for making it more positive. Begin by giving a brief lecture about how self-talk affects self-perception. In two written exercises, ask participants to record negative messages they may have received from important people in their lives. Have them practice turning negative statements into positive ones. For example, a participant would take the negative statement “I’m not going to do very well with this assignment” and try to change it to something like “I will try my best to do a good job with this assignment.” Discuss ways people can turn negative ideas into positive concepts, use affirmations and visualize themselves achieving their goals.

## “Gender at Work”

Women make up half of the world’s population and just under half of its workforce. Yet, women hold only “15-16% of *Fortune* 500 corporate officer and board positions.” The culture of business is male-oriented, which puts women at a disadvantage. Because women’s leadership style is different than men’s, companies often underutilize their talents. Moreover, top executives may question women’s dedication and allegiance. These activities will help men and women address gender concerns:

- **“Gender issues at work”** – This exercise encourages discussion of gender issues. Have small groups share observations about men and women in the workplace, and reconvene. List and describe issues, like “emotions in the workplace, sexuality, inclusion-exclusion...[and] stereotypes” as well as “power, control and competition.” The topic of sexuality, for instance, might lead to a discussion of relationships, while the conversation on emotions could explore how men and women express their feelings differently.
- **“Myths and stereotypes: old wives’ tales”** – In this activity, participants identify how everyday messages like proverbs and popular sayings contribute to gender stereotypes. Discuss a list of well-known gender-based sayings, such as “May the best man win,” “It’s a man’s world,” “Boys will be boys” or “A woman’s place is in the home.” Ask participants to think of lyrics, adages or slogans that reinforce such stereotypes. List and analyze the responses. Conclude by noting how ordinary messages influence perceptions.

## “Culture and Career Transitions”

This activity helps participants who are contemplating career changes or transitions:

- **“Identifying your values: an exploration”** – This helps people make solid career decisions that align with their values. Ask participants to complete two written exercises. The first helps them identify work-related preferences. Do they like to work alone or collaborate? Are they risk-takers or security seekers? How well do they manage their time? In the second exercise, ask people to prioritize their values by ranking them in categories and writing about each one. After people fill out the forms, divide them into small groups for discussion and then reconvene as a large group to record your responses on a flipchart. To close, emphasize the importance of making career decisions based on your values.

## About the Authors

Diversity coach and trainer **Jonamay Lambert** is president of Lambert & Associates. **Selma Myers** specializes in intercultural training and is president of Intercultural Development. She is a co-author of *Conflict Resolution Across Cultures*. The authors have co-written 13 trainers’ guides in the Diversity at Work series.

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