

Knives and Forks

Josh Levene

Objective

The aim of the exercise is to introduce participants to some of the principles of participation; especially how empowerment depends in part on transparency and sharing. It is especially effective with participants who are in positions of seniority.

Time

- One hour.

Materials

- A knife and fork (or something similar).
- Flipchart paper, pens.

Format

- Participants seated in a close circle (preferably on chairs).

Number of participants

- Minimum: eight; maximum: thirty; optimum: sixteen.

Steps

1. Begin by having participants seated in a closed circle – include yourself in this circle.
2. Before the day begins, it is useful to have identified a co-conspirator to covertly explain the secret code to.
3. Explain to participants that during the course of this game, you want them to concentrate on how they are feeling.
4. Tell participants that you are only going to explain the rules of the game once – so they should listen carefully.
5. Explain to participants that all they are required to do is to pass the knife and fork onto the next person either crossed or uncrossed and, as they do so, to announce to the whole group whether they are “crossed” or “uncrossed”. Explain that you, the facilitator, will tell them whether they are correct or

not. Do not explain any more to them. There will be bemused looks and questions: ignore them and just get started!

6. You the facilitator start the process off. Now, here's the secret code: whether participants are correct or not in announcing “crossed” or “uncrossed” does not depend at all on how they position the knife and fork – but on whether their legs are crossed or not! So for example, if a participant's legs are crossed and s/he announces that the knives and forks are “crossed” then they are correct and you congratulate the participant. The participants can position the knives and forks any way they like – but they will only be correct if their announcement matches the position of their legs.
7. Keep participants passing the knives and forks around and around the circle. As the game progresses, participants quickly realise that there is a code to be cracked. Before long, some people will discover the code and join in congratulating or berating people depending on whether they get it right or wrong. As time progresses, those who haven't yet cracked the code will begin to experience feelings such as frustration, infuriation, stupidity, apathy, boredom etc. These are all good indications that the exercise is going well.
8. About ten minutes of passing the knife and fork around is usually enough for participants to go through the full range of emotions. You'll know when it is time to stop. At this stage (and before telling the participants the secret code) ask those who still haven't cracked it how they are feeling. Write these up on a flipchart. Then ask those who have cracked it how they feel and record these. Then ask one of them to explain the code to those who haven't got it yet.
9. Now ask those participants who cracked the code why they didn't tell the rest of the group what the code was (they rarely do – yet the rules you explained did not mention that they could not).

10. Divide the participants up into four discussion groups; each covering one of the following sets of questions:

Set A

- When I'm disempowered I feel...?
- Towards those who disempower me I feel...?
- Examples of this are...?
- We are unable to participate when...?

Set B

- When I'm empowered I feel...?
- Towards those who empower me I feel...?
- Examples of this are...?
- We are able to participate when...?

11. After fifteen minutes ask the two Set A groups to come together in one group and the two set B groups to come together to share ideas. Ask them to record these ideas on a flip chart.
12. After another fifteen minutes ask Set A and set B to present to each other.
13. Hold a short plenary discussion and draw out the main points of the advantages of participation and disadvantages of non-participation.
14. This exercise can be followed up with identification of "upper-lower" relationships or other similar exercises that introduce participatory behaviours and attitudes.

Variation on this theme

An alternative discussion to that above may be held specifically around issues of information sharing and people's inability to participate when they are not in full possession of "the facts" or "rules". For example, encouraging greater information sharing between all stakeholders in Poverty Reduction Strategies.

My experience

- I usually precede this exercise with an energiser of Fruit Salad: this ensures that participants are already in four discussion groups, in the required seating format, and that they are relaxed and ready for anything!
- There are several advantages to identifying a co-conspirator. If they are seated opposite to you, they can help you check whether participants' legs are crossed or not on your side of the circle, of which you don't have a clear view of. They can also prove to participants that it is not just you who is making up the rules as you go along. Additionally, if that person is, relative to the other participants, perceived as a "lower" in some way, then it makes the rest feel doubly "inadequate".
- This exercise is most powerful when used with managerial or senior participants – especially when they are in a mixed group with more "junior" participants. It is a good leveller.
- But, because of that, people can get very sensitive and defensive – use your best judgement on who to use this exercise with.
- That said – don't be too shy about using this exercise! I have employed it with government ministers and international donors without hesitation. The aim is to make people conscious of the feelings dominant power dynamics, attitudes and behaviour produce. As long as you stress that it is a learning exercise and not personal, you should be fine.

Josh Levene, IDS, Participation Group, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9RE, U.K.
Tel: +44 (0)1273 606261
Fax: +44 (0)1273 621202
Email: J.Stevens@ids.ac.uk

Notes