

## **Toothpicks Activity**

### **What is it?**

An activity that helps participants realize the impact of nonverbal communication on daily conversations and how integrated our nonverbal behaviors are with our own communication styles. Participants are given written instructions about particular behaviors they prefer in conversations (such as a handshake or pauses of 7 seconds) and told that they are bothered when other participants do not follow their behavioral preferences. When other participants violate their behavioral preference, they give out toothpicks to notify others they have been bothered or offended. The toothpick seems to hold a certain symbolic significance as well...as people "offend or bother" someone, it is like "poking" them and, after repeated offenses, leads to increased frustration.

### **What materials do you need?**

Different nonverbal behaviors written out on slips of paper (see suggestions in *Communication Highwire* - full reference below) and toothpicks (see suggestions below for colored toothpicks possibilities).

### **Why do you do it?**

Nearly every person in a training environment knows that nonverbal behaviors differ by culture. As a result, participants typically are ready for skill development in trying to understand the range of nonverbal differences present in day-to-day communication and to try to understand how to develop skills in recognizing these behaviors when interacting with others. This activity challenges participants to try to realize why they are getting toothpicks from others as a way to develop their ability to move from awareness of difference on an abstract level to skill development in seeing the differences in front of them.

### **What is the process?**

This activity is described in detail in *Communication Highwire: Leveraging the Power of Diverse Communication Styles* (2005) by Dianne Hofner Saphiere, Barbara Kappler Mikk, and Basma Ibrahim DeVries, Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, Maine. Since publishing this activity, we have found great success in making the activity more complex...see some suggested adaptations below.

### **Possible adaptations:**

The activity works well in focusing on specific roles in context. For example, for teacher training for K -12, we have assigned participants to be teachers or parents and have adapted the behaviors to be applicable to those representative of cultures in the school district. For cross-cultural counselors, we have assigned participants to be counselors or clients. The behavior cards are color-coded so that the counselors (all shades of blue) would interact only with clients (shades of yellow). You may also use color-coded toothpicks for added dimensions. We often give participants their pack of 12 toothpicks containing exactly 3 red toothpicks which are designated as "serious offense" toothpicks. We have also tried giving participants their packs of 12 toothpicks (3 each of 4 different colors) and then suggested to them that they individually decide the "levels of offense" of each of their colored toothpicks (ex. red is most serious offense, yellow just indicates a

borderline offense, etc.). When done in this way, each participant knows what his/her toothpicks stand for, but others with whom they are interacting may have a different coding system and may therefore interpret the experience differently.

**What are things to watch out for?**

In the debriefing, make sure to challenge participants to not simply acknowledge that nonverbal behaviors differ across cultures. Encourage them to "dig deeper" by asking them to reflect on *how* they were successful in recognizing why they received toothpicks. If they weren't successful, how could they be? Help them to understand that awareness of differences is integral to developing skills and that on its own, *awareness is not enough to be effective in intercultural relationships*.

*Source: Barbara Kappler & Basma Ibrahim DeVries - Get Grounded! SIETAR-2005 Pre-conference Workshop, Jersey City, New Jersey  
(attended by Alice Wu)*