ISSSTRAINS
Stumbling Blocks to Intercultural Communication

Presented by:
Kimberly Yau
My Puzzling Intercultural Situation
My Puzzling Intercultural Situation

• Which stumbling blocks impeded effective and appropriate communication?
• What could I have done differently?
What Puzzling Intercultural Situation have you had?

• Complete the worksheet and share with a partner!
Intercultural Competence

• “A set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts.” – Janet M. Bennett, Ph.D., 2011
Activity: Laray M. Barna’s 6 Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication (1994)

• “Stumbling Blocks”: Barriers and habits that may contribute to misunderstandings across cultures during intercultural communication.

Activity

• Each illustrated scenario represents one of the six stumbling blocks to communication.

• Determine which illustration represents each stumbling block.
What stumbling block do you see?

- High Anxiety
- Tendency to Evaluate
- Stereotypes and Preconceptions
- Assumption of similarities
- Nonverbal Misinterpretations
- Language Differences
What stumbling block do you see?

• High Anxiety
• Tendency to Evaluate
• Stereotypes and Preconceptions
• Assumption of similarities
• Nonverbal Misinterpretations
• Language Differences
Assumption of Similarities

• **Stumbling Block**: Believing that all people have the same fundamental ideas, values, and perspectives.

• **How is this an obstacle to communication?**
  • Cultural (and personal!) differences lead to different meanings.
  • Practice note: When in doubt, ask!
Assumption of Similarities

How can we avoid this stumbling block?

• Assume difference!
• Ask open-ended questions.

Examples

• Friendship
• Family dynamics – independence
What stumbling block do you see?

• High Anxiety
• Tendency to Evaluate
• Stereotypes and Preconceptions
• Assumption of similarities
• Nonverbal Misinterpretations
• Language Differences
Stereotypes and Preconceptions

• **Stumbling Block:** Using overgeneralized, possibly inaccurate beliefs to make sense of situations or predict interactions.

• **How Is This an Obstacle to Communication**
  • Cause offense and lead to shutdown and withdrawal.
  • Miss important, unique aspects of the individual.
Stereotypes and Preconceptions

How can we avoid this stumbling block?

• Use generalizations as a springboard for interaction, but do not stereotype

Examples

• Physical touch
What stumbling block do you see?

- High Anxiety
- Tendency to Evaluate
- Stereotypes and Preconceptions
- Assumption of similarities
- Nonverbal Misinterpretations
- Language Differences
Tendency to Evaluate

• **Stumbling Block:** Moving to judge something as “good” or “bad” based on whether or not it aligns with your own tastes or your own way of thinking.

• **How Is This an Obstacle to Communication?**
  • May isolate people or make them question their ability to safely express their cultural values within a new setting.
  • Snap evaluations often cloud interpretation.
Tendency to Evaluate

How can we avoid this stumbling block?

• “Don’t yuck my yum.”
• Do not assign negative value to something just because you do not understand it or personally like it.
• Practice Mindful Communication.

Example

• Conflict management
What stumbling block do you see?

- High Anxiety
- Tendency to Evaluate
- Stereotypes and Preconceptions
- Assumption of similarities
- Nonverbal Misinterpretations
- Language Differences
Language Differences

• **Stumbling Block:** Differences in vocabulary, idioms, slang, dialects, etc.

• **How Is This an Obstacle to Communication?**
  • Important details in the conversation may be missed.
  • Someone may be afraid to ask for clarification.
  • Can lead to frustration.
  • Example: “How are you?” basically means “Hello”
Language Differences

How can we avoid this stumbling block?

• Avoid (or explain) slang and abbreviations.
• Slow down speech.
• Repeat information or directions patiently.

Examples

• Texting abbreviations
Language Differences (slide 2 of 2)

How can we avoid this stumbling block?

• Use stresses and pronunciation to convey meaning.
  • Question tone when you’re asking a question
  • When you’re done speaking.

Discussion

• Share an example of a time when language differences caused confusion for you or someone you were speaking with.
What stumbling block do you see?

• High Anxiety
• Tendency to Evaluate
• Stereotypes and Preconceptions
• Assumption of similarities
• Nonverbal Misinterpretations
• Language Differences
Nonverbal Misinterpretations

• **Stumbling Block:** Physical gestures or facial expressions can mean completely different things to different people.

• **How Is This an Obstacle to Effective Communication?**
  • Gestures and facial expressions are culturally informed.
Nonverbal Misinterpretations

How can we avoid this stumbling block?

• Be aware of your body language (and how others react to it) when communicating with people.
• If possible, try to mirror the nonverbal communication style of the other person.
What stumbling block do you see?

- High Anxiety
- Tendency to Evaluate
- Stereotypes and Preconception
- Assumption of similarities
- Nonverbal Misinterpretations
- Language Differences
High Anxiety

• Ties the other stumbling blocks together.

• **Stumbling Block:** Stress or tension caused by a lack of experience in communicating across cultures or within a specific culture (example: culture shock).

• **How Is This an Obstacle to Communication?**
  • Frustration may cause one or both participants to shut down or give up on trying to communicate.
High Anxiety

How can we avoid this stumbling block?

• Embrace discomfort and step outside of your comfort zone.
• Be supportive and patient with students who show signs of anxiety or culture shock or who are not forthcoming.
My Puzzling Intercultural Situation

• What should I have done differently?
Discussion

• Which stumbling blocks might help explain your puzzling intercultural interaction?
• What could you have done to overcome that stumbling block?
• What stumbling blocks might impede communication in your daily work?
• How might you overcome those stumbling blocks?
Questions?
Thank you!

Contact us:
isss.Illinois.edu

kyau87@illinois.edu