**Toothpicks**


**Objectives:** Participants will explore the ways in which nonverbal differences affect our communication styles and the meanings that we communicate or perceive.

**Assumptions/ Theory Inherent in the Activity:** Nonverbal differences, impact of small differences on how we interact, importance of the Communication Style Descriptor Checklist in understanding communication style.

**Time Frame:** 30 to 45 minutes.

**Materials, Supplies, and Handouts:** Toothpicks (enough for ten for each participant); overhead projector or flipchart; cards made by copying the handout at the end of this activity and cutting out one card for each participant. Mark the cards in some way (stickers, highlighting, gluing behavioral instructions to colored paper, etc.) so that each type of behavioral instruction is marked differently, enabling participants to easily distinguish people who have different behavioral instructions from themselves. You may want to make multiple copies of the handout sheet (which includes six different behavioral instructions), and you may also make up your own behavioral cards.

**Trainer Preparation:** Consider the level at which participants may have an emotional reaction and be prepared to facilitate this reaction. For example, novices to intercultural issues may be overwhelmed at how much one minor difference can affect the situation. More experienced participants can be very surprised that despite good intentions, they still behave inappropriately and they cannot decipher why. Be prepared to help participants understand the strategies they use to avoid getting toothpicks.

**How to Facilitate:**

1. Explain the objectives of the activity.
2. put these rules on an overhead or flipchart:
   a. Follow the rules on your card.
   b. Find someone with a different colored or marked card.
   c. Do not share what is on your card.
   d. Try to figure out your differences with nonverbal communication.
3. Give one card to each participant.
4. Encourage them to interact, discussing a common topic (for example, “what is one of your favorite movies and why?”)
5. Make sure when the nonverbal rules are violated that each participant gives a toothpick to the person breaking his/her nonverbal rule (this usually happens very easily!) For example, if your nonverbal rule is that you find sneezing or coughing offensive and another participant sneezes or coughs, give that participant a toothpick.
6. After the group has interacted for five to ten minutes, invite the participants to end the role play and begin the debriefing. During the debriefing, ask the following questions:
   a. What did it feel like to participate? To give toothpicks? To receive them?
   b. How easy or hard was it to discover what someone else’s nonverbal rules were?
   c. What does this suggest about how easy or difficult it can be to interact when you don’t know the rules?
   d. What were the nonverbal differences encountered? What are other ways nonverbal behaviors can differ?
   e. In what ways did the nonverbal differences affect your own communication? Your interaction with others?

7. Make sure to include this last question, as it connects nonverbal behaviors to communication style.

Tips: This brief activity can have quite a bit of power if participants feel they are interculturally savvy but they keep getting toothpicks! If this is the case, this activity lends itself well to a discussion that knowing about differences is very important, and that knowing when a particular difference makes a difference is an additional skill.

Adaptations: Could use other supplies, such as points that would be added up and with the lowest scorer receiving a prize.

---

You find direct eye contact offensive. When you speak, you try not to look people directly in the eye; instead, you avert your eye contact from listeners. If someone looks at you in the eye, give that person a toothpick.

You like to know that people listen when you speak, and you expect that people show they are listening by nodding their heads. You nod your head when others speak. When you are speaking, if listeners are not nodding their heads, give them a toothpick.

You find people standing closer than about eighteen inches or one half meter away from you as offensive. Stand at quite a distance from people and give them a toothpick if they stand too close to you.

During conversations, you find tapping one’s feet or fingers or fidgeting offensive. Try not to do this when you speak to people, and give them a toothpick if they do this when you are speaking with them.

You like it when people get their ideas out quickly in conversation, and you are easily distracted by vocalized fillers such as “um”, “ah”, and “er”. If people do not speak quickly enough or if they use vocalized fillers, give them a toothpick.

When speaking, you pause frequently, and you do not like to be interrupted until you have finished speaking. You do not interrupt others when they speak. If people interrupt you and do not give you enough time to pause, give them a toothpick.