

Building bridges: Engaging activities for enhancing cultural agility

RIDHA MEJRI



BIOGRAPHY

Ridha Mejri grew up bilingual in Arabic and French and has lived and worked across multiple countries, including over 20 years in Germany. He holds a master's in applied linguistics from Heidelberg University and a TEFL certificate from the University of East Anglia. Currently, he lectures in Business Communication and Intercultural Management at Worms University of Applied Sciences. Ridha also works as a trainer and consultant, offering seminars for executives and expatriates. He speaks five languages: Arabic, English, French, German and Italian.

This workshop focused on intercultural competence and communication, addressing various aspects of cultural awareness and sensitivity. It began by asking participants to reflect on what intercultural competence meant to them, encouraging discussion with neighbours. The participants were then asked to rate their own intercultural competence on a scale from 1 to 10 and discuss their rating with a neighbour.

Culture shock experiences

Participants were encouraged to share their biggest culture shock experiences, promoting reflection on cross-cultural encounters and their impact on personal growth and understanding.

Airport scenario and unconscious bias

The presenter introduced an airport scenario to discuss unconscious bias. This led to a discussion where participants were asked to reflect on:

1. their surprise at seeing photos that challenge stereotypes;
2. ways to mitigate unconscious bias;
3. what they learnt about their own biases;
4. how these biases might influence their daily work life;
5. biases they have experienced in their working context.

The presenter offered three strategies to reduce the negative impact of unconscious bias.

Framework for understanding human characteristics

The presenter introduced a framework for understanding human characteristics:

- **personal:** Traits unique to an individual
- **cultural:** Traits shared by some people within a cultural group
- **universal:** Traits common to all humans

A quiz was conducted where participants were asked to categorize various statements as personal, cultural or universal traits.

Key takeaways

- **Intercultural competence:** The ability to communicate and behave effectively across cultural boundaries is crucial in today's globalised world.
- **Perception and culture:** Our cultural background significantly influences how we perceive and interpret the world around us.
- **Unconscious bias:** Recognizing and addressing our unconscious biases is essential for improving intercultural interactions and promoting inclusivity.
- **Strategies for improvement:** Slowing down, challenging our thinking and asking questions instead of making assumptions are effective ways to mitigate the impact of unconscious bias.
- **Human traits spectrum:** Understanding that human characteristics can be categorized as personal, cultural or universal helps in navigating intercultural situations more effectively.
- **Engagement and reflection:** The workshop emphasized the importance of active participation, self-reflection and open discussion in developing intercultural competence.

The workshop offered a comprehensive and interactive approach to understanding and developing intercultural competence. By combining theoretical concepts with practical exercises and real-world examples, it aimed to enhance participants' awareness of cultural differences and their own biases. The focus on visual perception exercises, personal experiences of culture shock and discussions about unconscious bias provided a multi-faceted exploration of how culture shapes our worldview and interactions. The strategies offered for mitigating unconscious bias were practical and applicable in various professional and personal contexts.

Overall, this workshop served as a valuable tool for individuals and organizations seeking to improve their intercultural competence and to create more inclusive environments.