***Who’s on First:* An Exercise on Workplace Communication**

Abstract: This fun and interactive session will explore the benefits and challenges of showing a classic Abbott and Costello comedy routine to a group of international students who were unfamiliar with baseball. We will show a clip from the comedy routine and have participants identify the various barriers to communication illustrated in the video. Participants will also discuss whether they have had similar challenges adapting their teaching materials to an international audience.

Keywords: International Students, Communication Barriers, Video Clip, Humor.

**Introduction**

This activity features the classic Abbott and Costello routine “Who’s on First” (Abbott & Costello, 2017). This routine focuses on a comical interaction between the sender (Abbott) and Costello (receiver) about the names of the baseball players on a team. For those who have not seen this routine, the humor is derived from the fact that the players have unusual names (e.g. the first baseman’s last name is *Who*, the second baseman’s last name is *What*, the third baseman’s last name is *I Don’t Know*). The routine is rich in potential when teaching a communication unit at either the undergraduate or graduate level because it allows the students to identify fundamental aspects of effective communication and barriers to communication. We have often wondered, however, whether this routine would be effective in a classroom where the majority of students had no knowledge of baseball and where English was their second language. Thus, we introduced this routine to a group of 37 MBA international students (majority from China). We wanted to explore the cross-cultural implications of showing this routine to international students.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

When teaching communication theory as part of an organizational behavior course, it is helpful for instructors to employ exercises that allow the students to identify the communication process (i.e. sender, encoding, the message, the channel, decoding, the receiver, noise and feedback) (Langton, Robbins and Judge, 2016), barriers to communication (e.g. language, selective perception) (Langton, Robbins and Judge, 2016) and effective communication practices such as seeking clarification, not making assumptions, and using active listening (Bisel, Messersmith, & Keyton, 2010; Foote, 2013; Lengel & Daft, 1988; Manisaligil & Bilimoria, 2016; Wagenheim & McAdam, 2016).

This routine is highly effective because the sender is unaware of the communication barriers in place as a result of the players’ highly unusual names. The instructor can facilitate a discussion in which the students try to make suggestions for what the receiver could do to clarify his confusion (e.g. please spell the first baseman’s name). The instructor can then facilitate a discussion focusing on situations where the student has experienced a miscommunication in past team or workplace contexts.

Our concern was whether or not the routine would be effective with an international audience where English is a second language and there was no prior knowledge of the sport of baseball. Various cross-cultural barriers to communication may include semantics, word connotations, tonal differences, whether a culture is high or low context and differences in tolerance for conflict (Munter, 1993). The exercise has the potential for the class to consider the important role of semantics and word connotation.

**Learning Objective**

This session will engage instructors by challenging them to think of how this exercise (and others) may need to be adapted to meet the needs of an international audience. This session will also provide instructors with another resource when teaching a communications module in principles of management or in an organizational behavior course.

**Exercise Overview**

As noted in the session description, we will show the miscommunication clip featuring Abbott and Costello (Abbott & Costello, 2017). Participants will discuss how communications theory can be applied with respect to sender/receiver, barriers to communication, and ways to overcome these barriers. We will also facilitate a discussion of special challenges we’ve encountered in showing this video to an international audience and how we’ve overcome these challenges. This will then enable us to facilitate further discussion among the participants about times when the participants have experienced challenges in applying an exercise or activity to a diverse group of students.

**Session Description**

This exercise will be one hour in length. We believe that up to 40 participants can enjoy this session and, depending on the number of the attendees, we will divide the participants into small groups to facilitate discussion. We will require a computer/laptop with internet access so that we may show the routine that is widely available on YouTube. We will require a projector and screen so the attendees can see the routine.

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| Introduction by presenters, providing some context of the session | 5 minutes |
| Video will be shown | 10 minutes |
| Participants will brainstorm about some of the communications theory (sender/receiver, barriers, best practices) illustrated by the video | 10 minutes |
| Participants will brainstorm some of the potential issues in presenting this video to an international audience | 10 minutes |
| Participants will provide examples of times when they have experienced challenges in adapting an exercise or activity for a diverse or different audience | 15 minutes |
| Session conclusion and wrap up | 10 minutes |
| Total | 60 minutes |

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