



Erasmus+



Exercise for one-way communication – making butterflies

Source: *Unforgettable Experiential Activities: An Active Training Resource* by Mel Silberman

Introductory remarks

In this exercise participants make butterflies out of pieces of paper. As the trainer does not answer the participants' questions when unclear instructions are given, the results can be comical. Space is created for different outcomes. The exercise demonstrates the ease with which poor verbal instructions result in a variety of interpretations of even the simplest instructions (e.g. "Fold the paper in half"). It is based on a classic exercise on the drawbacks of one-way communication.

Aims

- Demonstrating that words can be easily misinterpreted
- Emphasising the importance of active learner involvement
- Emphasising the role of symmetrical communication in the coaching process
- Introducing the idea that participants must take responsibility for their own learning process

Size of the group

- Unlimited

Duration

- 10 minutes

Materials

- One sheet of (preferably coloured) paper for each participant
- Butterfly pattern made following the instructions

Description

1. Give each participant a piece of paper. Coloured paper would be better than white paper.
2. Give the participants the following instruction: "I am about to give you some simple instructions for making a butterfly". Show the model of a butterfly prepared with the "Instructions for making a butterfly model". Make sure that all participants can see it. Hold the paper butterfly up for at least 15 seconds. During this presentation, inform the participants: "You too will be able to make a similar

butterfly when you listen to my simple instructions. As our time is limited, I will not answer your questions. Listen to the instructions carefully. I will speak slowly".

3. Refraining from further comment, hide the butterfly pattern. Then give the instructions:

- a. „Pick up your sheet of paper and hold it in front of you”.
- b. „First fold a sheet of paper in half”. Allow plenty of time for this part.
- c. „Now tear off the top right corner”. Wait 15 to 20 seconds.
- d. „Fold the sheet in half again and tear off the top left corner this time”.
- e. „Fold it in half again and tear off the bottom right-hand corner of the page”.
- f. „Now unfold the sheet of paper and let's see what has been created. If I have communicated properly with you, and you have listened carefully to my instructions, then all the pieces of paper should look like butterflies”.

4. Show participants a model of a butterfly. Check how many participants have made models that qualify as butterflies. They will be in the minority. Point out the various creations that have been created by giving inaccurate instructions. There is sure to be much laughter. Ask participants why their paper cuttings don't match yours. The likely answers will be as follows: "You put your butterfly aside", "We couldn't ask questions!" or "The instructions we were given could be interpreted in different ways”.

5. Admit that during the instruction [you deliberately did not give clear, detailed instructions](#). It was [not possible to ask questions or look at the finished model](#). Also, point out to the participants that [they were not encouraged to compare their own work](#). Overall, there were many things you could have done to make the instruction more effective.

6. Ask if it was necessary to explain and demonstrate to participants step by step how to fold and tear the paper. Most participants will answer this question in the affirmative. However, warn participants that such an approach would assume imitation and have nothing to do with real learning. Only making a butterfly without any prompting would show that participants have acquired the skill.

7. And this is where the surprise comes in. There are always a few participants who will make a butterfly even with such limited instruction. Ask people who have successfully made butterflies whether they attribute their success to luck. Most of them will answer in the negative. They simply managed to memorise the butterfly pattern presented and then found a way to make the cut-out themselves. Congratulate them for taking responsibility for their learning process, something that all learners should do

8. Repeat the conclusions of this exercise.