

Objective: To identify the barriers to intercultural communication in intercultural situations involving airline travel.

TIME REQUIRED	About a half day
RISK LEVEL	Low
PARTICIPANTS NEEDED	Any number of participants with some experience in airline travel, plus one facilitator
PROCEDURE	<p>Please take the following steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain to students that the situations in Exhibit 4.3 occurred aboard international airline flights and were collected to illustrate the dynamics of intercultural communication for a training program. 2. Instruct students to read each situation and briefly reflect on the perspectives of the people involved. 3. Then, have students indicate which of the intercultural communication barriers listed at the beginning of the exhibit apply to the listed elements of the situation. The answers are given at the end of the exhibit.
DEBRIEFING	In debriefing the instructor should review the situations and the communication barriers in each situation to make sure the students understand each barrier in the incident. Students may have additional examples of barriers to communication from the incidents or from their own experiences. The instructor should monitor the emotional level of participants carefully so that the discussion is not sidetracked in a destructive direction. Some questions for discussion are as follows:

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1. What are some of the unique problems that come up in international air travel?
2. Have you personally experienced a critical incident during an international flight?
3. Which situations aboard an airline are the most difficult?
4. How would you describe a multiculturally skilled flight attendant?
5. How can flight attendants best be trained in multicultural skills?

INSIGHT

People behave differently when they are airplane passengers on an international flight than they would otherwise.

Exhibit 4.3 Identifying Barriers to Intercultural Communication Using Airline Incidents

The following descriptions of situations involving airline passengers and flight attendants can help you learn to identify barriers to intercultural communication. There are five such barriers: language differences, stereotyping, evaluation, use of nonverbal communication, and stress.

Situation 1: Last Rites

1. Read the situation.

As the passengers boarded the plane, a new flight attendant noticed that several Latin American passengers crossed themselves and seemed to say a small prayer, as though they were expecting to crash and were preparing to die. When one of the U.S. passengers called the flight attendant's attention to this behavior and asked what it meant, the flight attendant was not sure enough of the accurate interpretation to respond, even though the flight attendant felt it was his responsibility to respond in some way.

2. Identify the perspectives.

From the Latin Americans' perspective, they were practicing their religious beliefs as they had learned them to provide comfort in a stressful or unfamiliar situation.

From the U.S. passenger's perspective, there was some suspicion associated with a group of persons speaking a foreign language and performing an unfamiliar ritual.

From the flight attendant's perspective, he had to explain a cultural behavior that he didn't really understand.

3. Indicate which barriers apply to the following five elements of the situation:

1. the use of a foreign language
2. religious beliefs that seem strange to some and familiar to others
3. suspicion of foreigners
4. an unfamiliar way to cope with a situation
5. an unfamiliar gesture with ambiguous meaning.

Situation 2: A Money Tip

1. Read the situation.

During a flight through the Middle East, one wealthy Middle Eastern passenger was very pleased with the service he received from the flight attendant and wanted to show his appreciation. As the flight was preparing to land, he handed the flight attendant a sealed envelope and asked her not to open the envelope until she reached her hotel that night. The flight attendant agreed not to open the envelope and accepted his explanation that it was a card with a poem of appreciation in it and that he would be embarrassed if the flight attendant opened it in his presence. When the flight attendant opened the envelope later, she discovered that it contained a large amount of money.

(continued)

2. Identify the perspectives.

From the Middle Eastern passenger's viewpoint, he was used to giving a gift of appreciation for special occasions, and to have the gift rejected would be a serious insult to him.

From the flight attendant's point of view, it was not according to regulations to accept money gifts, but she didn't want to offend the passenger either, and she would like to keep the money.

3. Indicate which barriers apply to the following five elements of the situation:

1. the money itself and what it symbolizes
2. the possible expectation that the passenger might want special favors
3. airline regulations prohibiting both accepting money and offending passengers
4. Middle Eastern customs regarding giving and receiving gifts
5. anxiety in wanting to please both the airline and the passenger.

Situation 3: Left-Handed Flight Attendant

1. Read the situation.

A flight attendant happens to be left-handed and normally uses her left hand in whatever task she performs. On one flight, a Middle Eastern passenger traveling first class became extremely upset when the flight attendant served him his drink with her left hand, and he refused to accept the service. Furthermore, the passenger insisted on filing a formal complaint against the flight attendant for being extremely insulting and failing to acquaint herself with Middle Eastern customs.

2. Identify the perspectives.

The Middle Eastern passenger expected the flight attendant to know Middle Eastern customs because the airline flies to that part of the world. He was insulted when the flight attendant used her left hand, which is considered both ritually and literally unclean in Middle Eastern culture.

The flight attendant did not understand what she had done wrong and saw herself as treating all passengers alike. If the rest of the passengers were happy with the service, she felt, why should this passenger be unhappy?

3. Indicate which barriers apply to the following five elements of the situation:

1. Middle Eastern customs about the left hand being unclean
2. the passenger's expectation that flight attendants are culturally knowledgeable
3. the flight attendant's habit of using her left hand
4. the anger of the Middle Eastern passenger
5. stress at having made the Middle Eastern passenger angry enough to write a complaint letter.

Situation 4: Finger Snapping

1. Read the situation.

A well-dressed and apparently wealthy Latin American man was sitting in the first class section, demanding special attention from the flight attendant. He would call for the flight attendant by snapping his fingers repeatedly until the flight attendant turned around and came over to his seat. The flight attendant had experienced more than enough difficulty during the day and was getting irritated at his calling by snapping his fingers.

2. Identify the perspectives.

From the Latin American passenger's point of view, he was calling for service as he would call for any servant back home, and he was required to show only the courtesies he would show those of lesser rank in society.

From the flight attendant's viewpoint, the passenger's snapping his fingers was demeaning and offensive in the extreme and suggested his wanting immediate and very special attention beyond the attention given to other passengers.

(continued)

Exhibit 4.3 *Identifying Barriers to Intercultural Communication Using Airline Incidents (Continued)*

3. Indicate which barriers apply to the following five elements of the situation:

1. snapping fingers as a mode of asking for service
2. a superior attitude toward inferior ranks of society
3. anger at being looked down upon
4. stereotypes of servants and inclusion of flight attendants in the category of servant
5. unwillingness to adapt to other forms of calling for service, like using the call button.

Situation 5: European Style

1. Read the situation.

One of the European flight attendants was being criticized by the other flight attendants for being blunt and discourteous in her treatment of passengers and in her relations with other flight attendants. When the European flight attendant was confronted with this criticism, she defended herself as being appropriately formal in her relationships according to the guidelines of professional behavior. She interpreted any less formal behaviors as unprofessional. Several of the U.S. flight attendants discussed ways of dealing with this difference of opinion.

2. Identify the perspectives.

From the European flight attendant's point of view, she should be allowed to conduct her work independently in a formal and professional style as she had learned from her culture, without interference from coworkers.

From the U.S. flight attendants' point of view, it is necessary to be informal and friendly to all passengers and for flight attendants from all cultures to work together as a team on that basis.

3. Indicate which barriers apply to the following five elements of the situation:

1. the learned meaning of professional behavior
2. the interpretation of formal behavior as unfriendly
3. isolation of a culturally different coworker
4. stereotypes of passenger reactions to formal behavior by a flight attendant
5. the giving of negative feedback to a coworker from another culture.

Situation 6: Everybody Looks Alike

1. Read the situation.

A U.S. passenger called one of the Asian flight attendants and asked her to return her bag to her. The Asian flight attendant insisted that she had not taken the woman's bag, but the passenger became more and more angry, insisting that the Asian flight attendant was lying. At this point, one of the other Asian flight attendants came up to the woman and said that she had been the flight attendant who had stored the woman's bag and would get it immediately. The U.S. passenger excused herself, saying that "all Asians look alike anyway."

2. Identify the perspectives.

From the U.S. passenger's point of view, she was a bit suspicious of the foreign flight attendants and was anxious to make sure that she was not being taken advantage of in any way.

From the flight attendant's point of view, people of Asian origin were being unfairly stereotyped as all alike and not being acknowledged as individuals, just because they were from a different culture.

3. Indicate which barriers apply to the following five elements of the situation:

1. stereotypes about Asian flight attendants
2. anger at believing she was being lied to by the flight attendant
3. embarrassment of both passenger and flight attendants
4. similarity between the two Asian flight attendants
5. the passenger's anxiety about her bag.

(continued)

Situation 7: Knife, Fork, and Spoon

1. Read the situation.

The very traditional Japanese passenger was obviously uncomfortable during the meal service and was not touching any of the food. The passenger had indicated earlier that she was very hungry, so the flight attendant was surprised when he picked up her full tray at the end of the meal service. Later, the person sitting next to the passenger talked with the flight attendant and confided that the passenger did not eat, even though she was hungry, because she was not used to using a knife and fork, but preferred chopsticks.

2. Identify the perspectives.

The Japanese passenger wanted to avoid the embarrassment of either asking for chopsticks or trying to eat with a knife and fork and doing it improperly, so she chose to withdraw.

The flight attendant did not know that the passenger preferred chopsticks and served her the way he had served all the other passengers, assuming that all passengers would prefer knives and forks.

3. Indicate which barriers would apply to the following four aspects of the situation:

1. the unfamiliar custom of eating with a knife, fork, and spoon
2. the embarrassment of requiring special attention
3. the expectation that all passengers eat with a knife, fork, and spoon
4. the lack of fluency in English by the passenger or in Japanese by the flight attendant.

Situation 8: Saying Yes or No

1. Read the situation.

A Chinese passenger who did not speak English was flying alone and was shy among so many strangers. The flight attendant was trying to help the passenger to be more comfortable, but every time the flight attendant would ask her a question, the passenger would shake her head up and down, as though saying yes, while moving her open palm from side to side in front of her face, as though saying no. The more the flight attendant tried to interpret her gestures, the more embarrassed and uncomfortable the passenger became.

2. Identify the perspectives.

From the Chinese passenger's point of view, she was more interested in reducing embarrassment than in getting service. She was trying to respond appropriately in a neutral way that left the interpretation up to the flight attendant.

From the flight attendant's viewpoint, she was trying to get a simple yes or no answer from the passenger so she could get on with the job of providing service. She was determined to get a response without regard for the embarrassment that resulted.

3. Indicate which barriers apply to the following five elements of this situation:

1. the ambiguous hand signal
2. the expectation that the passenger wants service
3. the method of saying yes or no to a question
4. anxiety at flying by herself
5. the embarrassment of not being able to respond appropriately as the flight attendant expected a passenger should respond.

(continued)

Exhibit 4.3 *Identifying Barriers to Intercultural Communication Using Airline Incidents (Continued)*

Answers

Situation 1: (1) language differences, (2) stereotyping, (3) evaluation and stereotyping, (4) stress, and (5) use of nonverbal communication.

Situation 2: (1) use of nonverbal communication, (2) stereotyping and evaluation, (3) evaluation and stress, (4) use of nonverbal communication and stereotyping, and (5) stress.

Situation 3: (1) use of nonverbal communication and evaluation, (2) stereotyping, (3) use of nonverbal communication, (4) stress, and (5) stress and evaluation.

Situation 4: (1) use of nonverbal communication, (2) evaluation and stereotyping, (3) stress, (4) stereotyping, and (5) use of nonverbal communication and stereotyping.

Situation 5: (1) stereotyping, (2) use of nonverbal communication, (3) evaluation, (4) stereotyping, and (5) evaluation.

Situation 6: (1) stereotyping, (2) stress and evaluation, (3) stress and evaluation, (4) stereotyping, and (5) stress.

Situation 7: (1) use of nonverbal communication, (2) stress and evaluation, (3) stereotyping and evaluation, (4) language differences, and (5) stress.

Situation 8: (1) use of nonverbal communication, (2) stereotyping, (3) language differences, (4) stress, and (5) stress and stereotyping.

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