

**BARNGA<sup>®</sup>: A GAME ON CULTURAL CLASHES**

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the proposed interactive session is to introduce the participants to a game called Barnga. In this game of cards, the participants experience cultural shock when they move from their group to another group who appears to be playing the same game but has different rules that they do not understand. The differences among groups are subtle, but they hinder a person's ability to function in the new group. Participants are led to the realization that, in spite of surface similarities, people from other cultures have differences in the way they do things. A person has to reconcile these differences to function effectively in a cross-cultural group.

**INTRODUCTION**

I was introduced to Barnga (Thiagarajan, 1990) by a student who had experienced the game in a cross cultural communication class at our university. I tried the game in my Organizational Behavior class to discuss the issues of Diversity Management. In the past, I had used BaFa BaFa (Shirts, 1977). Bafa-Bafa usually required over two hours of play time, assistance of an additional person, and significant prior organization of materials. Barnga, on the other hand, could be played and debriefed in only 45 minutes, required only one facilitator, and had much less set-up time.

**Barnga: The Game**

The game is named after a West African town where the idea of this game was born in the author's mind after he personally experienced the shock of subtle cross cultural differences which

affected the functioning of his task group. The game places participants in situations where the unnoticeable cultural differences sneak up on them right when they feel they understand the rules of the game. At the heart of Barnga's design is the premise that the cultural differences are often very subtle and can be masked by many obvious similarities. Despite their subtleness, these differences, however, can cause problems in interpersonal relationships and accomplishment of tasks. This premise is very similar to many real life situations where people are often not aware of the differences between the other group and their own group until the differences suddenly sneak up on them. In Barnga, the group task is simulated by a card game called Five Tricks which uses only 28 cards- Ace, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 in each suit. The similarities and the differences among groups are created by discretely providing each group with a different version of rules for the Five Tricks. The game and process are relatively simple.

Participants are divided into small groups of four to six players each. The groups are separated from each other. Each group is given a deck of 28 cards and a sheet of rules for playing the game, Five Tricks, and the tournament guidelines. While the tournament guidelines are the same for all groups, there are, however, as many versions of the rule sheet as there are groups. For example, if there are four groups, the facilitator should have four different sets of rule sheets. To disguise the differences among the rule sheets, they all are copied on the same color paper and made to look the same. In order to tell them apart, however, they are coded at the bottom in a way that the facilitator can easily

distinguish among the different versions. The tournament guidelines are copied on different colored paper to distinguish them from the rule sheet for the participants and the facilitator. It also creates the illusion in the players' mind about the same colored papers being the same for everyone.

The participants are allowed a few minutes to study the rules and practice playing the game. After a few minutes, the facilitator collects the rule sheets and enforces the strict command of, "No communication through the use of words or sounds." This means the players can't communicate orally or through writing. They are, however, permitted to gesture and draw pictures. This restricted communication is meant to force them to be creative and alert during this game, which otherwise is short and simple. The participants are permitted to keep the tournament guidelines.

Next, the facilitator announces the start of the tournament. This means that the facilitator starts announcing the start and the end of a round, and the players begin playing the game, starting at their home table for round one. At the end of each round, the winner and loser from each table move to another table as explained in the tournament guidelines. The number of rounds and their length is at the discretion of the facilitator. The amount of total time available, the number of participants, and the facilitator's observations as the tournament unfolds could determine how many rounds should be played.

Once the facilitator announces the end of the tournament, the groups are brought together for debriefing. I believe, the success of the game lies in skillful debriefing. Debriefing is the most critical part of the game. Depending on the objectives of the facilitator, different questions can be asked.

An experienced facilitator could easily develop one's own discussion material. Before I launched into questions, I asked the participants to narrate their experiences. It was funny for the entire group to hear their classmates accuse each other of cheating, not learning the rules well, being too aggressive, not being aggressive enough, not being smart enough to figure out a simple card game and such. I used this discussion as a spring board to address the issues of the impact of cultural differences in building and managing effective interpersonal work relationships. I posed to them questions such as why or why you would not want to work with so and so, what happened to your feelings when someone behaved in an unexpected fashion from your point of reference, or how was your subsequent behavior impacted after experiencing some one's unexpected behavior? The issues of trust and betrayal were very predominant in this discussion which tied in nicely with the management of diversity - the topic I was covering in the class. The discussion can just as easily be tied in with cross cultural communication and doing business in a global market.

### **CONCLUSION**

Barnaga is a simple but versatile game that can be used to explore various topics, such as diversity management, cross-cultural communication, cross-cultural socialization, difficulties in international business and so on. One of the most attractive features of the game is that it can be conducted and briefed in a 50 minute class period, though it can be stretched effectively to fit a 75 minute class period as well.

### **REFERENCES**

- Shirts, O. (1977). *Bafa Bafa*. Del Mar, CA: Simulation Training System.
- Thiagarajan, S. (1990). *Barnaga*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press Inc.