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Pamoja: A Learning Activity for the Information Age

Many thanks to the two former Peace Corps volunteers, Gail Wadsworth and Wendy D. White, who developed this wonderful learning activity and make it freely available for everyone around the world.

For a free copy of Pamoja go to the Mortenson Center Web site.

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Introduction

Pamoja is an experiential activity that reaches across the borders of language, culture, and class to connect individuals, and in the case of this leadership institute, to connect librarians. The activity engages the participants in discussions about issues of global access to information. It explores how cross-cultural communication can facilitate or hinder access to information. It is presented in a game format and, as such, has some competitive moments, but more importantly creates a free-wheeling environment that encourages participants to focus on building relationships and to put aside concerns about cultural differences.

As one participant commented: “This kind of lighthearted interaction was the most enlightening to me. I actually began to connect with my peers, both international and American.”

So why introduce an experiential activity, a game, into this important leadership institute?

The purpose of the leadership institute is to encourage participants to explore their leadership styles, values, and attitudes about working with people from other cultures and countries, and to offer alternative strategies for engaging in those relationships. Lecturers presented a variety of ways to think about culture, language, libraries, and leadership.

Much of the institute was offered in a more traditional format: presentations that included small and large group discussions. The traditional learning format

avored individuals who have a good command of the language being used and were comfortable in the learning environment. We wanted to create an environment that changed the boundaries of the known learning situation, a environment where one's command of a language did not matter, an environment where all the cultural norms were new and strange, an environment where no one participant had more experience than the other. That environment was Pamoja.

In the words of some participants:

- “so many different approaches to creating a culture, communicating, and making things work on many different levels”
- “broke down a lot of communication and personal barriers, such as shyness”
- “joyous in that it got us working together as a leadership team in a way that nothing else could...”

Global library leaders have to develop skills in communication, identifying and naming geographical and cultural barriers, understanding the priorities of others, and becoming great listeners. Pamoja was the stage that allowed us to practice those skills.



Drawing borders

concepts that have been introduced in more traditional ways. Third, the facilitator must be skilled at running this type of activity, able to manage and assist with a light touch, and to reintroduce learned concepts into the discussion.

Pamoja – The Activity

The activity takes two and a half to three hours to play, and is best done in one-session, with a short break. It can be played with as little as 12 players or a maximum of 36. The main idea is that the participants are grouped and assigned to a country (Red, Green, Yellow, etc.). Each country group then creates a culture characteristic and develops information facts based on that cultural characteristic. Here are examples of cultural characteristics developed by the participants:

- A country where all conversation is sung

Content

Most librarians at some point or other in our careers have attended a training session that included an experiential activity, and have attended it with more or less enthusiasm. There are three keys to success when running this type of activity. First, the experiential activity must be thoughtfully developed, complex enough to replicate aspects of the real world and yet open enough to offer the participants the freedom to explore. Second, it must be used to reinforce

- A country with very friendly people
- A country where everyone likes to fish
- A country where you had to dress fashionably
- A country where you had to wear blue

Each group had to model their country characteristic during the game (and it is a secret), a strategy that adds to the fun and creates an additional level of difficulty. Each country group receives money (mojas) and some cultural and or educational institutions: universities, public libraries, and cultural centers. It is up to each country group to develop an information center building plan, deciding for example that they may want a public library in each region of the country.

The goal of the game is to exchange information facts with other countries in order to obtain funding that can be used to buy institutions such as libraries, and therefore meet the goals of your country's building plan.

There are three parts to Pamoja:

- Orientation and team preparations (50 minutes)
- Play (45 - 55 minutes)
- Debriefing (45 minutes)

1. Orientation and team preparations

Each team has about 4-6 members. The group has about 45 minutes to develop a cultural characteristic, create information facts and an information center building plan. Each individual also decides on their role in the game. They can choose to be a gatekeeper (like an immigration official), an ambassador (travels to other countries), or a country representative (the person who negotiates with ambassadors from visiting countries). To facilitate the game, there is also a foundation and a bank.

2. Play

The participants, modeling cultural characteristics and strategies in hand, begin to slowly play the game. The start of the game is chaotic as some countries are still not ready, others are rearing to go, and many have questions about how to proceed. In about 10 - 15 minutes, everyone is fully engaged in play and negotiating with other countries in an effort to obtain information facts. Once the play starts, it is very difficult to get the players to stop.

3. Debriefing

This section of Pamoja is core to its success as a learning tool, here is the place to discuss observations, reactions, questions that participants have. A key section of the debriefing is guessing country characteristics and debating if the characteristic assisted or hindered in the game.

Pamoja: A Learning Tool

Pamoja is a flexible learning tool that allows the facilitator to adapt it to the learning situation. It was a wonderful tool for the Thinking Outside the Borders Library Leadership Institute. We were interested in developing leadership skills that would work across borders so



At the negotiating table

much of the debriefing focused on having the participants verbalizing their answers to questions such as:

1. Were participants able to identify cultural characteristics and adapt strategies to fit the context?
2. Why was it easier to negotiate with some countries? How did their cultural characteristic impact the negotiations?
3. Did their communication style allow them to participate fully in all parts of the game, including negotiations?
4. Did some of the roles (ambassadors, bankers, country representatives, donors, gatekeepers) allow you to take more of a leadership position within the country or game?
5. What was the leadership style of your country group? How was it established?
6. What was the one lesson about leadership that you understood during this game?

Pamoja: Facilitation

Pamoja is a complex activity and it requires a lot of advance preparation, usually off-site, anywhere from 2-5 hours. Many of the details are not described in this module and people interested in using the game should consult the guide at the Mortenson Center Web site. The facilitator of this activity plays several important roles:

- *Logistics and Facilities Coordinator*

Setting up the game and having the facility ready is crucial to the success of the game. Since Pamoja has so many details, it is critical that the facilitator spend the needed time to understand the progression of the game and verify that the venue is set-up as needed.

- *Communicator*

There is a certain amount of nervous tension that surrounds any activity of this type. Participants are unsure of what will be needed and how they will be asked to perform. The facilitator needs to establish immediate control over the situation, reassuring the participants, and develop an atmosphere of trust – an environment where confusion,

miscommunication, and questions are all acceptable. So it is important to communicate the purpose and the rules of the game in many ways: verbally, with Powerpoint back-up, examples, modeling the play, and many, many repetitions.

It is also important to understand that no matter how many times the information is presented, participants will interpret it in different ways. The facilitator should not overemphasize the rules of the game. It is precisely this different interpretation of the situation that is so like real life, and so necessary to understand and adapt to if one wants to work across borders.

- *Judge*

Some participants want to play the game exactly by the rules and want the facilitator to decide what is correct. It is reassuring to them to have someone decide what is right and wrong.



Bargaining with the bank

- *Distant Leader*

While some of the participants want firmly enforced rules, others revel in the gray areas of the rules, and there are many. Facilitators can choose to tolerate unusual practices. Some participants have tried, and at times succeeded, in bribing the bankers or the donors. Many participants have used interesting and unusual bargaining strategies. An environment that encourages the exploration of these boundaries creates a rich experience for the participants.

- *Teacher*

During the debriefing session the facilitator is the teacher. It is important to have developed before the debriefing the learning points that you want to emphasize during the discussion and then to craft questions that will elicit discussion around these learning points. It is a delicate balance since the content is coming from the participants and it does not always fit neatly into the predetermined curriculum. However, every comment or remark is a learning moment, so the facilitator must be able to move quickly to highlight some point or other before jumping to another topic.

- *Counselor*

Pamoja does mimic real life and therefore can create situations that might be interpreted as difficult or hurtful. In one case, a country team had decided that they had a matriarchal culture and would only negotiate with women. A male from a neighboring country was very upset at his treatment in this country. In this type of situation, the facilitator has to move the situation from the personal to the educational, in a delicate but firm manner.

Once the male in the situation understood that the cultural characteristic had created the communication barriers, a wonderful discussion ensued.

Summary

Pamoja is a wonderful learning activity for a leadership institute. It is adaptable, flexible, and just plain fun. Here are some tips if you want to use Pamoja in leadership training.

- Experiential activities can create a safe space for trying new skills and exercising leadership.
- Games and experiential activities change the traditional learning situation and therefore cause some tension. It is critical that an environment of trust is created so that individuals feel safe to operate within this environment. A safe environment requires that someone be in charge to monitor activity and also be open to all questions and comments.
- The purpose of the game is to allow everyone an opportunity to exercise leadership, therefore it is critical to monitor the exercise and to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to lead and a voice in the discussion about how to lead.
- The facilitator needs to be clear about which leadership skills and concepts that will be reinforced during the activity. Those skills and concepts will drive how activity is run.
- Running Pamoja is complex and, as any presentation, needs preparation time.
- Research has shown that the best learning happens on a peer to peer basis. In Pamoja, the participants are all teachers and learners.

Pamoja did and can add value to any library leadership institute. Perhaps the words of a participant best express its impact:

“I feel that this exercise was the catalyst to develop the trust needed to move beyond your ‘average’ participation.”

Resources

For a free facilitator’s guide to Pamoja go to the Mortenson Center Web site.

Appendix A

Pamoja - A cross-cultural simulation game

What is the goal of Pamoja?

- Different cultures value and share information in different ways. Pamoja helps the participants observe the principles of the free-flow of information in a fun way.
- Pamoja will help participants consider the development of information resources, information sharing and information gathering in an intercultural context.

What happens during Pamoja?

- Participants will be assigned to different countries. They will build information centers within their countries and then trade and share information with other countries.
- The game is fun and allows creativity and openness to new ideas and beliefs.

Country Goals

- Each country team will develop and follow a plan for building information centers in your country while interacting with and learning about other countries.

Country Development

- Each country is designated by a color.
- Each country has information centers: public libraries, universities, museums and community centers.
- Within each country, team members will have the following roles:
 - Country representatives
 - Ambassadors
 - Gatekeepers

Pamoja Schedule

- General orientation and team formation, 20 minutes
- Country and culture creation, 20 minutes
- Role selection and orientation, 20 minutes
- Playing the game, 45 minutes
- Debriefing, 40 minutes

Country Creation

- Draw a country with various geographic areas. The areas will be delineated in a handout for your country.

MONEY\$\$\$\$\$\$\$

- The Pamoja Union currency is called Mojas.
- You can buy:
 - Community center 500 Mojas
 - Public library 1,000 Mojas
 - Museum 1,000 Mojas
 - University 1,500 Mojas
- Some countries will be richer than others.

Cultural Characteristics

- Each country has to decide what is their defining cultural characteristic, this characteristic is kept secret from the other countries since they will have to guess the characteristic at the end of the game.
- You MUST model your country characteristic.

Examples of Cultural Characteristics and Infofacts

- Once you have a cultural characteristic, then you will come up with 15 infofacts about your country that reflect your cultural characteristic.
- Cultural Characteristic: Reading is most important in our culture.
- Infofact: Every child in our country receives a book in the hospital.
- Modeling characteristic: Everyone in the group walks around with a book.

Country Building Plan for Information Centers

- Once you have a cultural characteristic, then you will write a short building plan that describes how you would like to position information centers in your country. Your building plan should be related to your cultural characteristic.
- Example: Libraries and Universities will be placed in all regions in our country because we value reading.

Time to go to your country

20 minutes

- Review contents of packet
- Write name and country color on nametags
- Read team handout
- Draw the country with all regions
- Decide on one cultural characteristic
- Write 15 infofacts on post-its and post on or around the country
- Decide on how you will act out cultural characteristic
- Develop your country's building plan

The roles

- Country representative: stays in the country, is responsible for information centers and negotiates with the ambassadors from other countries
- Ambassadors: select search cards from gatekeeper, go to other countries, get information from other countries and share information and money with the team
- Gatekeepers: stay at the border of their country, allow or refuse entry to the country, assist the country representative, report for the team, manage the search cards and money
- Donors: listen to requests from countries for funding and can provide money to countries to build information centers
- Storekeeper/banker: sells information centers, issue money, and authenticates information searches

Sample search

- Ambassadors will randomly select search cards from a bag held by the gatekeeper of their country
- Example: Get an infofact from a public library in the Lake District of Country Green

Pamoja Chance Card

- Example: Country farthest away from you faces an economic crisis; go there and donate 100 Mojars to their country representative

Remember

- Negotiation is always an option.
- Donors are always approachable.

Back to your countries

10 minutes

- Decide team roles
- Gatekeepers receive bag of search and chance cards
- Countries finish their infofacts and building plans.