

BaFa' BaFa' – When cultures meet

Intercultural intelligence, cross-cultural competence, diversity, inclusion, international mobility, empathy training

What is this?

BaFa' BaFa' is an intercultural group learning simulation (game), intended to improve participants' cross-cultural competence by helping them understand the impact of culture on the behaviour of individuals and groups. Participants experience "culture shock" by traveling to and trying to interact with a culture in which people have different values, different ways of behaving and different ways of solving problems.

It was invented by Dr. R. Garry Shirts in 1974, in the framework of efforts by the U.S. Navy to improve the behavior of American sailors on leave in foreign ports, to help them understand the nature of culture itself and its impact on human interaction.

In this simulation, participants act as members of two contrasting cultures, Alpha and Beta, who send visitors to each other. After experiencing the "cultural shock" of these encounters, they are encouraged to discuss and identify its causes and realize "that what seems irrational, contradictory, or unimportant to us in our culture may seem rational, consistent, and terribly important in another culture" (Shirts, 1995).

Why is this important?

Future generations will have to live and work in an wholly intercultural environment, where cross-cultural competence will be a crucial skill and a distinctive strength.

This makes it an essential component of a future-oriented educational curriculum, in addition to its more immediate need in the context of international schools with their broad range of nationalities among the student body, and increasingly of regular public schools as a result of widespread immigration.

Cross-cultural competence is also a requisite for educators working in those environments, to help them leverage the learning opportunities offered by cultural diversity in their classrooms.

What can I use it for?

BaFa' BaFa' was originally intended for young adults in the military, but since its inception it has been widely and effectively played in many different settings, namely with charities active in the international scene, educators, medical staff, schools and many others.

In a school setting, **it should be played with high school students (14 to 18)**. There are adapted versions for middle school (RaFá RaFá) and primary school students (Blueland-Geelland).

How can I use it?

Please refer to the detailed instructions on the following pages.

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Audience

Students from 14 to 18, divided into two groups of 10 to 20 people.

Facilitators

The simulation can be conducted by one teacher/facilitator alone, but two facilitators will help save time and make it more dynamic as the two groups can be briefed simultaneously.

Learning objectives

- To help participants understand the idea, power and importance of culture To help participants learn how to value cultural differences
- To prepare individuals to interact effectively with different cultures
- To help members of a dominant culture value people from other cultures
- To reduce inhibitions in binational or international groups

Time

1 to 2 hours for the exercise, 1 to 2 hours for the debriefing

Materials

- Descriptions of two different cultures on coloured paper (makes it easier)
- Nametags (half named "Alpha" in red, half named "Beta" in blue)
- 1 box of 100 small multicolored paperclips for Alphans (or any other trinket available in different colours)
- 1 box of 100 large binder clips for Betans
- A special wristband to be taped on the Alpha leader's wrist

Conducting the simulation

1. Briefing and rehearsal

Two simulated cultures are created: an Alpha culture and a Beta culture.

The teacher/facilitator briefs the participants on the general purposes of the simulation and then distributes them between the Alpha or Beta culture subgroups. Each of the two cultures features a certain behavior, according to its implicit cultural code – for example, two antagonistic civilizations: a collective culture based on common good, solidarity, body contact; and an economic culture based on trade and profit, individualism as well formal and distant relations.

The two groups move into separate areas, where the teacher/facilitator teaches them in turn (or simultaneously, if two facilitators) the values, expectations and customs of their new culture, without telling them anything about the other civilization.

To help participants grasp and impersonate better their own culture, the following key questions may be helpful:

- How do we deal with each other? What makes us happy?
- Is my culture peaceful or warlike? Will my culture rule, observe, adapt?
- What is the goal of my culture (love, rule ...)?
- Religion of my culture: is there an idol or a priestess who is worshipped or any other form of religious activity?
- What do people in my culture live from and can I get what I need?
- ...

In addition, behaviors and forms of expression should be considered and practiced for the following emotions and needs:



- Uncertainty, fear of strangers, frightening situations
- Rejection
- Welcome (from strangers and group members)
- Affection
- Pleasure
- Love and hate How to get help?
- What to do to help?
- ...

2. Simulation: mutual visiting

Once all the members understand and feel comfortable with their new culture, each culture sends a visitor to the other. During the visiting period, groups will roleplay the values, expectations, norms, and customs of their new culture. The visitors attempt to learn as much as possible about the other culture without directly asking questions. After a set time, each visitor returns to his or her respective culture and reports on what he or she observed.

Based on the visitor's report, each group develops hypotheses about the most effective way to interact with the other culture. After the hypotheses have been formulated, the participants take turns visiting the other culture in small groups. (If with large groups, visitors may be sent in pairs to speed up the proceedings).

After each visit, the visitors report their observations to their group. The group uses the data to test and improve their hypotheses. When everyone has had a chance to visit the other culture, the simulation ends.

3. Debriefing

The participants then come together in one group to discuss and analyze their experience. If the purpose of the training is to train a person to interact or travel to a different culture, then the facts of that culture are presented as part of the discussion. If the focus is on diversity, then the discussion and analysis focuses on methods for creating a school culture that allows everyone to feel safe, feel included, be productive, and do their best work. The definition of a culturally competent person then, not only includes the ability to adapt or interact with people who are different, it means being able to design and sustain a work culture that includes everyone and allows each person to do their best work.

It is very important that the groups, together with the teacher(s), are in a position to reflect and answer the following questions:

- Feelings when you were preparing to take on the role of a new culture? Feelings as suddenly strangers came into your 'home'?
- Feelings as you visit a culture whose language, gestures and behaviors are unfamiliar?
- Did the other culture react the way you expected them to? Why (not)? How did you try to adapt?
- Can you try to explain the culture of the other group? Can you explain your own culture?
- What does this game remind you of?

Recommendations / tips

The groups should restrict themselves to simple rules, since the discussion is difficult enough.

The teacher should choose neutral civilizations to take the drama out of the dialogue and gain distance from one's own culture.

Appendices (see following pages)

- The Alpha Culture – description
- The Beta Culture – description



The Alpha Culture

Overview

- Choose a leader to wear the blue wristband.
- Leaders and people in high positions are highly regarded in your culture.
- You put great emphasis on group membership. The benefit of the group takes precedent over the benefit of any one individual.
- Relationships are extremely important. It is imperative that you do not say or do something that would make another Alphan feel bad or lose face.
- There is some gender bias in your culture. Men have more flexibility than women when it comes to communicating or getting things done with the exception of the leader if she is female.

Greetings

- Always greet other Alphans using the Alphan greeting – both people grab the left arm just below the elbow (forearm) to shake. During the arm shake, say “How is your family?”.
- NEVER greet a non-Alphan (a visitor) with the left arm. Always use the right arm and do not shake it. If someone shakes your left arm, it means that they are angry with you.
- Women can only initiate a greeting with another woman, but men can initiate greetings with both genders. It is a big insult to break this rule.

Small talk

- Stand very close to each other and use a lot of body language when talking. Touch the person’s elbow or shoulder. If an Alphan does not do this, it means that they don’t like you. Alphans value personal contact and intimacy with everyone.
- You love and honor senior Alphans. When you are in a group, you love to talk about your family. You always allow a senior person to lead the conversation.
- If you are in a conversation and a new person enters the group, he or she must stand there and wait to be invited into the group by an Alphan.
- You are very friendly to those who follow your rules.

Trading

- You love to collect and trade “clips” which is your form of currency. After making small talk, request to trade “clips.” You want to get as many “clips” as possible that are the same style. You trade “clips” by simply asking another Alphan to trade. Alphans will always trade with another Alphan if they have what someone wants.
- Alphans love to adorn themselves with “clips” and they love to talk about how many “clips” they have.
- Alphans only trade “clips” with visitors if he or she greets them properly. Otherwise, the Alphan will ignore the visitor and walk away.
- Ba-Fa-Ba in the Alphan language means “your father has no goats.” This is a huge insult. Alphans will not speak to anyone who says this to them.

Culture descriptions adapted by Jennifer Robertson, Valencia College, 2014



The Beta Culture

Overview

- You are a capitalist society, and you put great emphasis on wealth accumulation.
- This is a very individualistic culture that values the person over the group. You want to get ahead and work hard to get there, no matter what the cost.
- There is no hierarchy in the Beta culture. Everyone is equal, including the genders.

Greetings & small talk

- Greet each other with a nod of the head.
- You do not like to talk about the family or how much wealth people have. In a group, Betans like to talk about work.
- You do not like to stand close when talking or to be touched, especially on the shoulder. This is a huge insult. Betans will not do business with anyone who touches them on the shoulder and they will tell other Betans not to do business with them.
- When any person joins a group, he or she is readily welcomed into the conversation.

Trading

- You measure a person's value by how well he or she performs in the marketplace, but you think that it is impolite to show how much wealth you have to others. You NEVER discuss your wealth.
- You are familiar with the Alphan culture, and you are very interested in obtaining their "clips." You also like to trade something similar called "clasps."
- Betans have a special trading language which they use with ANYONE who wants to trade. It means, "Can I have # of those?" as following (point to what you want):
 - Ba – one
 - Ba Fa – two
 - Ba Fa Ba – three
 - Ba Fa Ba Fa – four

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