Poker Face

Supplies: A deck of cards

Grab a pack of playing cards, and distribute one card to each person in your group. Important – as you do this, announce that no-one should look at their own card.

Then ask everyone to place their card directly on their forehead, so that all others can see the face of the card.

When ready, invite everyone to start mingling around the room, holding their card on their forehead at all times. Then, explain that you would like each person to engage with and treat all others based on the face value of the card on that person’s forehead.

Most powerfully, invite your group to perform this task without ever talking to others, silently, allowing only non-verbal forms of communication. Gestures are absolutely permitted, but no individual should ever explicitly communicate the actual value of another’s card.

Initially, there may be a little confusion, but here are some typical behaviors you will likely see exhibited:

* The royalty (picture) cards attract a lot of positive treatment, such as bows, high-fives and smiles.
* The lowest value cards are often dismissed by others, perhaps even attracting dirty-looks, thumbs-down and the occasional uncomfortable frown.
* The middle-value cards are mostly ignored, or attract an array of confusing signals from others, some good, some bad. They may attract a ‘so-so’ hand gesture or a shrug of one’s shoulders.
* Sometimes, cards of a similar value start to hang-out together.

After 1 -2 minutes of mingling, stop the action – and VERY important, ask people to NOT look at their card (yet!)

What happens next is the most intriguing step.

Ask every person to divide into one of three groups – high-value cards stand to one side, low-value cards stand on the other side, and middle-value card holders stand in between. Naturally, this division is based entirely on their perception of the value of their cards (they still have not looked at their own card.)

Once everyone has associated with a grouping, take a moment for your group to observe the positioning of all others, and then ask everyone to look at their (own) cards for the first time.

Your group is now primed for a whole lot of sharing. Ordinarily, your group will erupt with all sorts of comments, stories and wonderment.

This activity can be a lot of fun, but critically, I recommend that you now invite your group to process what just happened to squeeze further value and teachable moments from their experience.

Poker Face is possibly one of the most dynamic – read, risky – group activities I know. It frequently evokes a lot of really powerful feelings for some people, so you will need to carefully sequence and facilitate the discussion that occurs at the end. I’m not trying to scare you – you just need to be aware of the power of what this simple, yet powerful exercise may generate. Ensure everyone leaves the activity with their self-esteem intact.

You will observe a range of very interesting, sometimes disturbing behaviors. For example, royalty cards may treat others poorly because they feel more powerful. Sometimes the people holding higher-value cards get bowed-down to, while the lowest cards get pushed away and treated poorly. At some point, those with the low-value cards will usually back-out of the middle of the mingling area. This can lead to a great discussion about a person’s willingness to fully participate in a group if they are being treated poorly.

Beware a group’s reluctance to respond to the discussion of certain behaviors with laughter only. Often, this is just a defense-mechanism (to relieve the tension,) but it may also reveal a deep-seated, and unhealthy set of attitudes and beliefs about other people. Process carefully, and be open to explore uncomfortable topics.

As a starting point, focusing on one group at a time (begin with low-value cards,) ask:

* What were some behaviors that you saw or were demonstrated towards you that lead you to believe you had a low/middle/high-value card?
* How long did it take you to realize that you had a low/middle/high-value card?

Then, focusing first on the high-value cards (then middle and low,) ask each group these questions:

* After you realized the probable value of your card, did it influence the way you played the game?
* What were some specific behaviors you demonstrated towards others because of the value of your card?

The responses to these initial questions are pretty profound. Follow up with one or more of the following:

* How did it feel to be a royalty card?
* How did it feel to be a lower-numbered card?
* What behaviors did you observe during the activity?
* How were you treated?
* Did you notice any secluded groups forming?
* How did it feel to be left out? How did this influence your thinking and behaviors? Be specific.
* How is this activity like everyday society? Give examples.

Source: Playmeo.com

*Playing with a Full Deck* by Michelle Cummings