

The Bag Exercise

A quickie experience of rank and privilege, especially economic class

This tool takes only 10 minutes to explain and run – but the debrief can be quite meaningful, up to an hour, depending on facilitation purposes.

Special Materials & Preparation

Have brown paper lunch bags for each participant. Packages of small multi-coloured candies (Skittles, M&Ms, Smarties, Goodies, JuJubes, Jelly Beans...). 4 larger wrapped chocolates, or 4 mini chocolate bars). Mixed variety of prizes, enough for half the participants (for example: big bag of Chips, large chocolate bar, an old T-Shirt, can of dog food, ugly knickknack that someone gave you...) It is important that the prizes should differ in relative value, so that later prize-winners have less choice and get "worse" prizes.

Mark the outside of the bags. For a group of 20, give 2 bags a yellow star, 3 bags brown squares and the remainder a green triangle. These markings make it easier to fill the bags, and ensure that the facilitator knows who got which type of bag. Fill bags.

Brown Bags: Leave one bag empty. Put one small candy in the other bag, making sure that it unlike any other candy in the room.

Green Bags: Put 3 or 4 candies in each bag, varying in colour and type, but ensuring that there are other candies of same colour and type in the room.

Yellow Bags: Put the four chocolates in one bag

Put all the extra candies in the other bag, so that it is large and full.

How to Lead

Tell participants that the goal of this exercise is to get four candies of the same colour and type (for instance, 4 blue Smarties). They will be able to talk during this exercise. Once they have got the four identical candies, they come to the front and choose a prize. Ostentatiously display the prizes and show off each one to the group. Ask if there are questions. Give out the bags, asking people not to look into them. Give out the bags randomly, with one exception: if there is someone who is really marginalized in the room, I ensure that they do not get one of the brown bags – that just increases their sense of victimization and isolation. Say "Go" – and people start to trade/cooperate/steal to get the required 4 identical candies. Give out prizes as people come forward, being sure to call out their victory loudly (and so put pressure on others).

Then debrief. Some possible debrief questions include:

- How are you feeling?
- What happened in the exercise?
- What gave some people more power than others in this game? What gives some people more power than others in life? (de-brief on rank and privilege)
- What links do you see to real life?

Trends to expect: people with brown bags often "opt out" of exercise. People with yellow bags get their first, and then may think about charity. People with less in their bags notice the disparity in bags, people with more in their bags don't notice the disparity.

Tool designed by Karen Ridd in Winnipeg, c. 1999.