

Intercultural Skills for Ruling Elders: Tools for Inclusion

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How can Presbyterian leaders encourage our churches to embrace diverse cultures, perspectives and faith experiences? What tools can we use to ensure that people of faith from diverse cultures participate in the faith community, have their voices heard and have their spiritual needs addressed? A well-known strategy to retain newcomers is to include them in the events, activities, groups and decision-making structures of the church. However, intercultural groups, including churches, are vulnerable to intentional and unintentional saboteurs. This article will help the reader identify some of most common sabotage tactics. It will then outline strategies that can be used in all church meetings for improving intercultural communication. The article includes two educational activities that sessions can use to hone their intercultural skills.

Listed below are typical tactics of a saboteur in group dynamics. Can you identify occasions when some of these tactics have been used in your church meetings? What strategies would you use to counter each of these tactics?

Educational activity: Take this list to a session meeting or retreat and discuss how your session might deal with each of these tactics.

1. Find a scapegoat to blame. Alternatively, find something very general to blame, such as "society today" or church polity.
2. Declare that you do not have "the" answer. This gets you out of having to answer at all.
3. Argue that the group must not move too quickly. This avoids the necessity of getting started.
4. Point out that no problem can be separated from any other problem, so no problem can be solved until all problems have been solved.
5. Suggest that the problem is simply a projection by unhappy members of their personal problems onto the group. Better: dismiss the problem as that of a small minority. This is sure to thwart efforts for future consensus-building.
6. Ask what is meant by the question. This will consume the discussion until time runs out.
7. Point out all sides of every issue to hide your own indecisiveness behind the illusion of objectivity.
8. For every proposal made, come up with an opposite, so that the middle ground (no proposal at all) appears to be the wisest choice.
9. Retreat into general objectives on which everybody agrees but that are so general that they do not suggest a course of action.
10. Thank the person who raised the problem, point out the profound discussion that resulted, and declare the meeting closed. This ensures there is no recommendation, conclusion or follow-up.
11. Use lingo that is not in general public use and confuses newcomers. When you use such words as "homologate," "narthex" and "sederunt," do so with such authority that no one will dare ask what these words mean. This is a particularly effective strategy to exclude newcomers and ESL (English as a second language) members of the group.

12. Assume that if people don't speak up they have nothing to contribute to the discussion.
13. Do not prepare or circulate a report ahead of time. Not only does this save you time, but you can make up the recommendations as you go, which will confuse everyone, especially those whose first language is not English.

Of course, some of these tactics have been exaggerated to make a point. However, that being said, if we can identify these tactics, we can begin to develop intentional strategies that will remove the roadblocks to good communication, include a diversity of perspectives and build consensus. The following list is comprised of tested strategies that will improve communication in intercultural settings, including formal church meetings and everyday encounters in an intercultural faith community. Many of these strategies also serve as good pastoral skills and can be employed in a variety of discussions and intercultural encounters.

1. Be aware of differences, including status (authority), age, gender and social and economic background that may cause misunderstanding.
2. Make sure your expectations and reactions are clear. Ask about the expectations and reactions of your conversation partner or committee member(s).
3. Some people prefer to express opinions on contentious issues in small groups. For discussion and input on important and/or contentious issues, use small groups and have each group report their discussion.
4. Listen actively.
 - Avoid jumping to conclusions about the message being delivered after listening to the person for only a few minutes.
 - Be patient and listen carefully to the message delivered at the end of the exchange as this may be a key point the person is trying to make.
5. Repeat, rephrase and illustrate messages and instructions. Avoid asking, "Do you understand?" Instead, write the message down or try to get the person to restate what you have said.
6. Expect delayed reactions.
 - It may take time for the person to think of appropriate words.
 - Avoid filling silence with chatter, which may distract the person.
 - It is often easier for people to write than to say what they mean.
7. Tell personal stories instead of jokes.
 - Humour and jokes often rely on nuances of language.
 - Telling personal stories is usually an effective way to build rapport.
8. Avoid slang, jargon and colloquial expressions.
9. When using examples, relate to common experiences or specific situations - a general example from your

own culture may not be understood.

10. Beware of acronyms.
 - Many acronyms change in other languages (e.g., AIDS is SIDA in French).
 - The initials MP or OPEC may not make any sense to the listener, or worse, they may spell something very unpleasant.
 - They may cause the listener to lose confidence in the speaker.
11. Explore ways to communicate and relate using visual cues (pictures, charts, diagrams) and shared activities.

Educational activity: Select any two strategies and practice them in at least three encounters during the next week.