

# Colourblind® Plus: Facilitator Notes



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Problem Solving

## ACTIVITY OVERVIEW



Colourblind® Plus is an extension to Colourblind® a classic verbal problem-solving activity that has been used for over 20 years to help teams reach a common understanding of meaning, and recognise problems caused with imprecise communication patterns. There is both a 'paired' activity and two group activities contained within these materials.

Colourblind® Plus extends the original activity through the introduction of 6 x new shapes, so that for those already familiar with Colourblind®, this activity will be a similar but more difficult challenge. However where a simpler and gentler introduction to describing these difficult shapes is required then a process is provided to work in pairs, then potentially in a smaller group, and then finally as a large group.

In the large group version of Colourblind® Plus individuals are required to draw on their experience and precise descriptive skills to explain to each other the complexities of abstract shapes that they can hold in their hands, but not see (participants are blindfolded).

In the pairs version they sit back to back, so that the blindfolds are not required and the ability to see the shape they describe to their partner, aids the task. In both cases participants use feedback and the skills of clarification to ensure that their understanding is accurate.

Colourblind® Plus was developed 20 years after the original Colourblind® activity - again by Dr. Geoff Cox - in response to the thousands of users around the world who described Colourblind® as their favourite experiential learning tool and wanted something similar and equally as good! Geoff used his experience in watching how groups would use teamwork and communication skills to solve the original Colourblind® problem, in order to create a new exercise that may feel familiar to those who have used Colourblind®, yet will provide a strong challenge. Like the roles of the the original air traffic controllers who were trained using Colourblind®, Colourblind® Plus allows absolutely no margin for communication error, misunderstanding or ambiguity in pursuit of success.

During the exercise, teams must:

- Set up and manage an effective communication system that everyone understands and can use efficiently.
- Develop a dialogue which will lead to a common understanding of abstract concepts.
- Deliver a successful solution to the problem they face.

The paired version of the Colourblind® Plus activity is also simple: a pair sitting back to back have to use just verbal description skills to identify which of three shapes they have is not a match with one of the three shapes the other one has. This is an excellent introduction to the detailed descriptions required to confirm understanding and to prepare for the challenge of the large group version, yet can also work as a stand-alone, challenging but brief, communications exercise.

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES



- To understand that effective communication is a two-way process requiring a message to be sent and the meaning to be received in the way the sender intended
- To consider how to improve both communication systems and the quality of the messages which those systems support
- To practise effective listening and refine questioning skills
- To develop flexibility in communication, changing and adapting language to meet the needs of the listeners
- To understand how our communication is culturally specific and how to ensure that we are using shared references to achieve common meaning

## ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION



### Paired Version

Up to 4 x pairs (with an optional observer per participant) are seated back to back so that they cannot see what each other is holding. Each participant is handed 3 x shapes, and the objective is to describe their shapes to their partner seated behind them, and through comparisons of these verbal descriptions, the pair decide which one of the three shapes that they have is not matched exactly to one that the other has (i.e. which of the three is the odd one out). The pair has 10 minutes to provide a single final answer, and there is an optional set of observer notes that can be used to include an observer to provide individual feedback.



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## ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION



### Small group version (up to 8 x participants per group).

Each of 2 x pairs (4 x people) plus observers (4 x people), who were working with the same set of pre-sorted colours, are brought together and seated and blindfolded for a second stage activity. As in the previous activity they will again be tasked with identifying the two shapes which do not exactly match, from a set of 12 x shapes that are distributed amongst the participants. If this activity follows the initial paired activity they may recognise the feel of some shapes as they will have seen and handled them before, but some may be new to them. The participants cannot transfer or exchange their pieces with each other and are reliant upon high quality verbal communication only, to solve their problem. At the end of the exercise they must identify a single 'group' answer to the problem. Each group has up to 20 minutes to provide a single, final answer to the problem.



### Large Group version

Each participant (ideally between 6 and 16) is seated, blindfolded and issued with a number of small plastic pieces. The brief suggests that the group has to identify the colour and shape of two pieces that were removed from the complete set of plastic pieces before they were distributed amongst the participants. The participants cannot transfer or exchange their pieces with each other and are reliant upon high quality verbal communication only, to solve their problem. At the end of the exercise they must identify a single 'group' answer to the problem. A period of between 20 - 45 minutes intense verbal information exchange and problem-solving approaches will typically be required depending on the abilities within the group. Should the group already have progressed through the paired and small group versions described above, then this activity will be much easier than if they begin with this Large Group version.



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## ACTIVITY MATERIALS



The materials supplied will enable you to work with the recommended group of up to 16 people.

You will need enough working space to ensure that the large team can work together and hear each other – the ideal arrangement is probably a 'horseshoe' shape of chairs, so that seated and blindfolded participants can receive the plastic pieces in their hands/laps.

For the paired version the back to back chairs should be separated so that participants can hear each other clearly

The materials supplied with each set of this activity include:

- 20 x blindfolds (re-useable, washable)
- 30 plastic pieces (6 x shapes in each of five colours)
- Facilitator Manual



## ACTIVITY TIMESCALE



An ideal time scale for this activity is given below. However, timings are flexible and may be altered to fit the time-frame that best fits your organisation.

### Paired Version

- 0 - 2 minutes Introduction to the activity and general description, arranging seating
- 2 - 3 minutes Issuing of verbal brief, handing out of plastic 'pieces' and confirming any questions prior to activity start
- 3 - 13 minutes Activity time ending with Pair response to problem
- 13 - 25 minutes Activity review and summary of learning

### Small Group Version

- 0 - 2 minutes Introduction to the activity and general description, arranging seating and allocation of blindfolds
- 2 - 5 minutes Issuing of verbal brief, handing out of plastic 'pieces' and confirming any questions prior to activity start
- 5 - 25 minutes Activity time ending with Group response to problem
- 25 - 45 minutes Activity review and summary of learning

### Large Group version

- 0 - 2 minutes Introduction to the activity and general description, arranging seating and allocation of blindfolds
- 2 - 5 minutes Issuing of verbal brief, handing out of plastic 'pieces' and confirming any questions prior to activity start
- 5 - 35 minutes Activity time ending with Group response to problem
- 35 - 65 minutes Activity review and summary of learning



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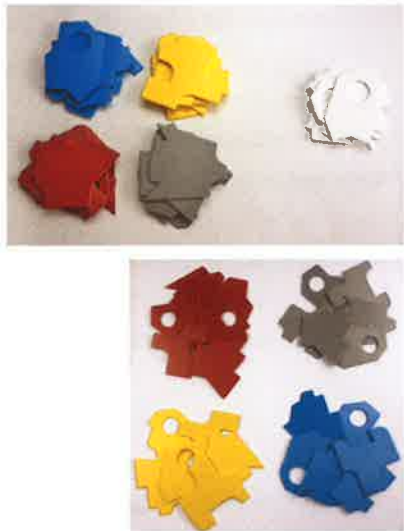
## SETTING UP THE ACTIVITY

### Paired Version

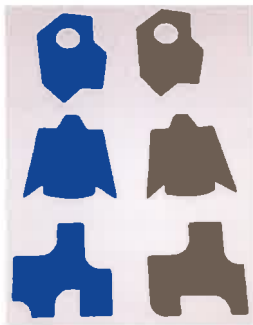
Before beginning the exercise you need to prepare as follows:

Arrange the seating plan so that each participant can be seated back to back, handle only the small plastic pieces and be able to hear each other clearly.

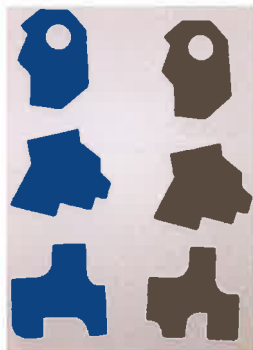
1. Take 4 of the colours: red, blue, yellow and grey (six shapes in each) – leave the white set to one side.
2. Put the blue set of shapes with the grey set of shapes and the red set with the yellow set, as in the photograph on the right
3. Follow the instructions in the photographs below:



*Pair a set of three blue shapes with a set of three grey shapes exactly as pictured below giving three blue/grey pairs. These sets of three will have two blue/grey pairs which match exactly and one which does not. Keep the pre-sorted pieces ready for distribution as appropriate to the participants.*



4. Set up working pairs of participants, so that they are sitting back-to-back and cannot see each other's hands.
5. Give one person the set of three blue shapes and one person the set of three grey shapes.
6. Repeat this process using the remaining blue and grey shapes and allocate these to a second working pair.



7. Repeat the entire process using the red and yellow shapes and set up two further working pairs if required.

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## SETTING UP THE ACTIVITY

### Small Group Version

1. Take all of the blue and grey pieces and combine them to make one set of 12 pieces.
2. Take all of the red and yellow pieces and combine them to make one set of 12 pieces.

3. Take this yellow piece and add it to the blue/grey set



4. Take this blue piece and add it to the red/yellow set



5. Your blue/grey set will now include one yellow piece and your red/yellow set will now include one blue piece. Keep the pre-sorted pieces ready for distribution as appropriate to the participants
6. Remove the blindfolds from the pack and ensure you have a blindfold for each participant



### Large Group Version

1. Remove the blindfolds from the pack and ensure you have a blindfold for each participant
2. Remove all the coloured plastic pieces from the box (30 in total).
3. Remove two single pieces from the set: we recommend 2 differently shaped and coloured pieces. Keep all pieces out of sight of participants.
4. Keep the 28 pre-sorted pieces ready for distribution as appropriate to the participants.

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## BRIEFING THE ACTIVITY



### Large Group Version

Seat the participants where they can easily hear each other (a 'horseshoe' shape of chairs is ideal) and issue each with a blindfold.

Explain that everyone will stay seated during the activity and ask participants to put on their blindfold. (If anyone is concerned with wearing a blindfold for any length of time you can ask them if they would prefer to take an observation role. Stress that at any stage in the exercise any participant may ask to stop and remove their blindfold if they feel uncomfortable).

Explain the exercise by reading out the activity brief as follows:

*"I have here a complete set of coloured, plastic shapes. However two pieces from the complete set will be removed before I distribute the remainder of the set amongst the group. You will have spread amongst you, a complete set minus two pieces. Your task is to identify the colour and the shape of the two pieces I have removed from the set."*

Explain the following rules:

Plastic shapes may not be passed between participants nor exchanged at any time

The question: *'What colour is this?'* will be answered by the facilitator correctly as many times as required by any participant. No other question will be answered by the facilitator in terms of trying to help the group solve the problem.

Distribute the remaining 28 pieces randomly and evenly amongst participants – handing the pieces to them and ensuring they know how many they have been given. Ensure blindfolded participants know which shapes 'belong' to them. (Ideally the group should work out for themselves how many pieces in total have been issued)

Answer any questions of procedure and indicate the time allowed: 30 to 45 minutes is recommended and at least 20 minutes will be required. Inform the group they may begin. When the group believes they have the complete answer (i.e. both colours and both shapes identified) they should offer it to the facilitator. Only 1 attempt is allowed so the group must be confident it is correct

## DURING THE ACTIVITY



1. Check that no one is able to see from behind their blindfold and that shapes are not being exchanged, dropped or passed around.
2. Answer the 'What colour is this?' question as many times as required – use the participant's names if several call out at once, or move around the group touching the hand of the person holding the shape if this is easier (and culturally appropriate).
3. Give time-checks and coach if you feel this is necessary. At the end of the maximum time limit ask the group to provide a guess or partial solution if they have it.  
IF THEY PROVIDE THE CORRECT ANSWER BEFORE THE TIME LIMIT EXPIRES MOVE STRAIGHT INTO THE REVIEW SESSION. IF THEY PROVIDE AN INCORRECT ANSWER BUT HAVE TIME REMAINING CONSIDER ALLOWING THEM MORE TIME, AND COACH THEM TOWARDS A SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION.
4. Let the group know of the success of their answer, ask them to remove their blindfolds, and to stay seated for a

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## REVIEWING THE ACTIVITY



### Paired Version

Ask the participants:

1. How did you choose to begin this activity?
2. Did you notice anything that changed about the way you described the pieces to each other?
3. What did you find helpful when you were listening to your partner's descriptions?
4. How did you confirm and check understanding and make sure the pieces you were describing were the same?
5. In what kind of situation in your own work might you need to use this type of accurate and shared communication and feedback? \*

During the review process, ask the observers to add their comments and confirm from their notes anything that they saw.

\*Work related examples might be:

- Giving specific instructions about a piece of equipment, a tool or a component used in a manufacturing process – making sure the right equipment is supplied
- Giving instructions about a specific task that is to be achieved – delegating specific responsibilities
- Sending email orders, confirming arrangements, agreeing contracts
- Checking emergency procedures, safe operating practices

### Small Group Version

Ask the participants:

1. How effectively did they manage the communication in a bigger group?
2. What learning from the initial exercise were they able to apply in this task?
3. Was any system developed for naming or identifying the shapes?
4. Was any process for retaining and managing information developed?
5. What learning is there in this exercise about effective team communication?
6. How could this learning be applied directly in the workplace?

### Large Group Version

1. Allow at least the same duration of activity time to de-brief the exercise.
2. Prepare your own set of relevant questions or use the suggested ones on the review sheets that follow.  
Colourblind® Plus focuses on two key aspects of communication:
  - The appropriate selection and management of the system and means of communication.
  - The accuracy and quality of the 'content' of the communicated message.

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## Communication Area 1



### Managing Information

#### Large Group Version

In this exercise, there is a large volume of information which the group needs in order to solve the problem. It is highly unlikely that any individual can retain all the individual pieces of information and therefore the groupmembers need to establish a process for gathering, sorting and remembering the key information that they will need to solve the puzzle. Questions which should be followed up in the de-brief include:

- Did we establish clearly and early our objective for the exercise?
- Did we create a process to ensure that all the relevant information was made available early in the activity?
- How did we ensure that information which we had gathered was sorted and retained during the activity?
- How did we ensure that all the information we were working with was relevant and factually correct?
- How did we check out assumptions and move from 'unknown' to 'known' information?

#### Application in the workplace: suggested areas to explore:

- How effectively do you manage information in your own job?
- How do you sort and retain the relevant and useful information from all the data which reaches you?
- Are there ways in which you could improve your information management and facilitate access to important shared information?
- As information transfer becomes easier all the time, how do you avoid information overload and ensure that the quality of the information you make available is high?

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## COMMUNICATION AREA 2



### Group Communication and Chairing Skills

#### Large Group Version

It is vital to the success of the COLOURBLIND® Plus exercise that the group establishes a process for managing the communication and that everyone in the group understands that process and adheres to it. Questions which should be followed up in the de-brief include:

- How actively and consistently did we listen to each other?
- To what extent did we ensure that 'cross-conversations' and sub-group dialogue did not emerge during the activity?
- Was there a focus for the communication: did we appoint a chairperson or did someone emerge in that role?
- How did we ensure that all the group members were able to participate actively and that
- no-one was excluded from the group?
- How and when did we change/adapt our communication process during the course of the activity?
- How did we ensure that the dialogue stayed focused on the task objectives?

#### Application in the workplace: suggested areas to explore:

- In group discussions and meetings, how do you ensure that everyone's contribution is heard and valued?
- How do you select the most appropriate person to chair a discussion?
- Is this based on seniority or are other skills involved?
- What are they?
- What 'patterns' of communication are you aware of in your own team discussions?
- Who tends to speak first?
- Who is always listened to?
- Are there pairings in which the individuals tend to support each other's ideas?
- Are there people who will always argue with each other or challenge each other's position?
- How do you go about changing established communication processes if you recognise they are not effective?



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## COMMUNICATION AREA 3



### Speaking the Same Language and Establishing Common Meaning

#### Large Group Version

One of the fundamental requirements of the COLOURBLIND® Plus exercise is that the group establishes a shared understanding of the descriptions of their components. Frequently, participants describe two different shapes to each other and, as the descriptions are not detailed and specific enough, agree that they are talking about the same shape. This also happens all too frequently in the workplace! Questions which should be followed up in the de-brief include:

- What were the different types of description that were used in identifying the shapes?
- Which of these were the most satisfactory and why?
- How did the descriptions change as the exercise progressed?
- What were the ways in which understanding was checked and confirmed: what opportunities were there for re-checking and clarifying ambiguous descriptions?
- What did you notice about individual preferences in the way shapes were described? (eg. compare metaphorical, "Like an arrowhead" with geometric "A triangle with an arc on one side")
- Were you aware of any 'cultural' issues which emerged, especially if working in more than one national language?
- Were you aware of any use of English which may have caused problems (eg. because of dialect or 'slang' or words with more than one potential meaning) which may have caused problem for non-native speakers?

#### Application in the workplace: suggested areas to explore:

- What 'jargon' do you use at work? How has this developed and what are the potential problems with relying too heavily upon it?
- How do you ensure that messages/communication which you have initiated is being received and in the terms you intended?
- As a receiver of communication, how do you confirm rather than assume your understanding?

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## COMMUNICATION AREA 4



### Valuing Diversity. Recognising and Working with Different Individual Communication Strategies.

#### Large Group Version

As the COLOURBLIND® PLUS exercise proceeds, it rapidly becomes clear how different the individual styles of communication are and how different the needs of individuals are. This understanding can be usefully applied in any situation of instructing, teaching or coaching and can be a valuable management skill in ensuring that staff are confident and well-motivated. Questions which should be followed up in the de-brief include:

- What did you notice about the different ways in which individuals tackled this exercise?
- What does this tell you about their preferences for the way in which information is presented to them?
- What attempts did you see people making to change their own communication style in order to accommodate another person's needs?

This exercise will fail unless everyone is confident in their own understanding of what is going on. What did individuals do to ensure their own understanding and that of others?

#### Application in the workplace: suggested areas to explore:

- What lessons could you take from this exercise and apply if you were in a position of training or teaching someone a new skill?
- What preferences are you aware of in your own communication style and how might these help or hinder your communication with others?
- Can you give examples of this in reality?

Individual understanding of abstract concepts comes from relating new experience to past experience. Here is an example of some dialogue from a COLOURBLIND® PLUS activity:

"I have a piece that is like a rectangle with points and a hole in the middle."

"Yes, I have one too...two points and a circular hole."

"Yes, I think I have one...does it look like a Capital A?"

"No, not an A...like a rectangle with a diamond shape lying over it..."

"Would you describe it as an arrowhead?"

"No, that's a different shape..."

"So there is more than one piece with a circle hole in the middle?"

"Yes, I've got two, one looks like a Star Trek symbol..."

"What's a Star Trek symbol?"

"Like a triangle, but instead of having three flat sides one is an arc..."

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## COMMUNICATION AREA 4



In this exercise example this came through in the culturally specific reference to 'Star Trek' which may not have meaning to everyone involved. How do you ensure in your professional context that abstract concepts (eg. organisational values or competencies for appraisal) are understood in the same way by all the individuals concerned?

*"I was teaching English to a group of trainee teachers in Sri Lanka. It was the monsoon season, the afternoon was dark and the power suddenly failed. I continued to talk to my students, in the gloom, until one of them stopped me. "Madam," he said, sincere and apologetic, "I'm very sorry but I can't hear you in the dark." When the laughter ceased we paused to think. The rest of the students agreed. Without access to all the visual cues they were used to reading, my students could not "hear me" In the dark."*

Ann Alder, RSVP Design Ltd

*"I have a piece here which looks like the top of a pineapple."  
"Is it two arcs, joined by a long rectangular vertical bar?"  
"I don't know. Think about preparing a tomato for a dinner party. You know how you serrate the edge..."  
"I don't do dinner parties. Does it have four points at the corners and is it symmetrical down its vertical axis?"  
"Depends which way you hold it up but I think so. We're not on the same planet, are we? How do we ever work together?"*

Two members of a Senior Management Team within a Financial Services Company