



Beliefs, aspirations, and perspectives are as diverse as the colors on a painter’s palette

Here is a powerful exercise I have done with both kids and adults. At its heart, the activity is about gaining a deep understanding of and appreciation for multiple, competing views of reality. No single person owns the truth about any given topic or thing — each of us owns a piece of the truth. If we welcome and leverage our differences toward common goals, we stand to build buy-in, true collaboration, stronger classrooms, schools, and communities. We stand to make the best possible decisions. I borrowed part of this activity from Barbara Sher, speaker, coach, and best-selling author.

— Susan Scott

SUPPLIES

- Paint chips in many colors, at least twice as many chips as there are participants.
- Paper and pencil.
- Striped beach ball.

STEPS

1. Spread out paint chips on a table. Ask participants to choose a color they really like.
2. Ask participants to write “I am” and insert the name of the paint color.
3. Ask them to write three or four lines as if they were speaking as the color. Give them an example, such as, “I am Blazer Red. I am warm. I am passionate. I am never boring.” Or “I am azure. I am cool. I am peaceful. I am deep, like the ocean.” Give them about one minute to do this.
4. Ask for volunteers to read what they wrote.

5. Ask: “Of all the colors you’ve heard about so far today and all the colors on the table, which color is the best color of all, the right color?” They will explain to you that there is no “best” or “right” color, that all of the colors are pretty terrific, and that, even if they could make everything turn into their favorite color, they wouldn’t because it wouldn’t be special anymore.
6. Ask if it had been hard to choose their color. You can also ask if choosing their color seemed important. Most will say that it had taken them awhile and that it did seem important because they like lots of colors, and even though they had a favorite color, there are so many shades of red, blue, green, and they wanted to find the one they liked the best.
7. Suggest that one of the reasons why they really thought about what

color they chose is because the things they wrote about that color describe them. Suggest that they stand and read what they wrote, but instead of the name of their color,



say their name. For example, “I am Susan. I am cool. I am peaceful. I am deep like the ocean.”

8. Ask: “So who’s the best? Who’s the right kind of person?” Go on to say something like, “We don’t

In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott (susan@fierceinc.com) explores aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success At Work & In Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002) and *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst “Best” Practices of Business Today* (Broadway Business, 2009), leads Fierce Inc. (www.fierceinc.com), which helps companies around the world transform the conversations that are central to their success. Fierce in the Schools carries this work into schools and higher education.

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often talk about ourselves in this way, do we? We don't usually introduce ourselves with, 'I'm fiery and passionate' or 'I'm peaceful and deep.' But when we get to know each other, we notice these qualities, right? And if any one of you were not here, we would feel it. We would miss what you bring into the room with you when you arrive every day. So keep being you because there's not another you anywhere in the universe. You're it!"

If there is time, go on to part 2 of this exercise.

PART 2

1. Hold up a large, striped beach ball and ask participants what colors they see on the beach ball. Imagine this beach ball is the world, and every person in the world lives on a different colored stripe. There would be billions of stripes, each stripe a different color. Let's say that I live on the blue stripe. Hold the beach ball right up to your face, with your nose pressed to the blue stripe. From where I live, can I see the orange stripe? No. Or the red stripe or the green stripe? No. So if you asked me what color the world is, what would I probably say? Blue. Would I be right about that? Yes and no. There is blue, yes, and there are other colors as well. So who owns the truth about what color the world is? Let participants discuss. In fact, everyone owns a piece of the truth, and no one owns the entire truth because we can only see the world from our own perspectives.
2. So, for example, if I had a problem, and if I asked each of you to tell me what you think I should do to solve my problem, how many different ideas might I hear? As many different ideas as there are people in the room. I'd hear blue ideas and green ideas and pink ideas. And if I listened to all of your ideas, do you

think that I might hear some ideas that are better than the one I had, and that this might help me make the best decision about how to solve my problem?

3. So here we are. Each of us sees the world a bit differently; each of us has different ideas, different perspectives. Is this a problem or a good thing? Let participants discuss. Draw them out.

WHY DO THIS EXERCISE?

Perhaps you, like me, are fatigued by the foolishness, the arrogance, and the intransigence of many people on this planet, including leaders, who make decisions without input from others, ignoring competing perspectives. Their goal is to get agreement and issue mandates. Their goal is to *be* right, rather than to *get it right* for all of us. Consequently, some of their decisions end up causing pain and hardship, making us weep on too many fine days.

As educators and administrators, we are obligated to prepare students to thrive, not only in a multicultural classroom, but also in the world, where they will make their way amidst people who have beliefs, aspirations, and perspectives as diverse as the colors on a painter's palette.

THREE BELIEFS

I have three beliefs I feel are essential for success, happiness, and the ability to collaborate with the members of a global community.

The first is from Madeleine Albright, former U.S. secretary of state. When asked what advice she would give world leaders, she said, "What matters anywhere matters everywhere." If one part of the world, one member of a

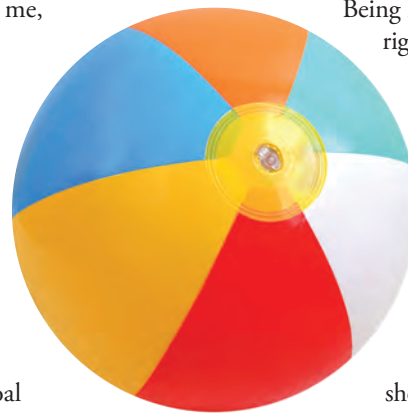
family, one team within an organization is struggling, it matters to the rest of the world, family, organization. Or should.

The second belief is: There is more than one right way to live a life. Consequently, when we have problems to solve and decisions to make, it would behoove us to invite competing perspectives before taking action.

The third belief is: In a very real sense, the progress of the world depends on my progress as an individual, now.

So what am *I* modeling *now*?

Being right or getting it right? Issuing mandates or inviting input? Delivering a monologue or inviting a conversation? The quality of the conversations in classrooms all over the world model for students how they should show up in the world. I think there is work to be done.



LEARN, PRACTICE, AND MODEL

As human beings, we all need the skills to understand each other, to hear, acknowledge, and welcome a diversity of opinions so that we can innovate and work together to realize our collective visions and goals. The same skills that students need to navigate their lives through college and careers are the same skills adults need to demonstrate to students. One of the most powerful examples we set as adults is to learn, practice, and model this kind of collaboration — whether in our leadership teams, professional learning communities, or in the classroom. This will demonstrate to students that, while we don't need to agree with one another, we do need to understand and respect each other. Students are watching how we treat each other. We can't ask of them what we're not willing to practice ourselves. ■