

Butterfly Activity

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Experience the interdependencies of a system.
- Recognize that when you change one part of the system, it has unintended consequences.
- No one is in control of the system.
- There are external forces that can influence a system – you don't always know where changes are coming from.

DESCRIPTION

1. Introduce the objectives of the activity.
2. Set up: ask for volunteers and move group to an open space.
 - a. NOTE: The activity works best with five to six people. If you are working with a bigger room, ask for 1-2 volunteers from each table to come forward and have the rest of the room to be observers.
3. Ask participants to silently identify two other people in the group, not including you.
 - a. NOTE: Remind participants not to say or look at who they picked.
4. Tell the participants, when you say "Go" to move around so that they land equidistant from the two people they picked.
 - a. NOTE: Equidistant does not mean linear.
5. Say "Go!" and wait until all participants stop moving.
 - a. NOTE: It's important to let the "system" run until it reaches stability.
6. When participants stop moving, say you will "pause" the system to make some improvements.
 - a. Select one or two people from the group and move them to a different place, asking everyone else to remain still.

Time

20 minutes

Topics

Systems thinking, Seeing the System

Prior Knowledge

This activity is designed for beginner audiences, and acts as an introduction to systems.

7. Restart the system: Ask people to do any rearrangements they need to be equidistant from their two people.
 - a. NOTE: Let the system run until people stop moving.
8. Table debrief (5 min)
 - a. Ask observers, what did you notice? (Tip: Provide “look-for’s for those observing the game; for example, you can prompt those observing to look for the following: (1) who was related to whom, and how did you figure this out; (2) how do you think people felt when trying to navigate their system; (3) did your observations remind you of your professional environment/system, and if so in what ways?)
 - b. Ask participants, how did it feel to be a part of the system?
9. Whole group debrief (5 min)
 - a. Who was controlling the system?
 - b. How does this activity speak to your experiences in education?
10. Key Debrief Points:
 - a. Small changes in one part of the system result in unforeseen changes to the system as a whole.
 - b. All systems are perfectly designed to produce the results they get. Unless we change something about how the system fundamentally works, the system will stay the same.
 - c. Change is not linear and doesn’t happen at the same pace.

POSSIBLE MODIFICATIONS

- To emphasize that systems are riddled with structures, processes, and policies that we must navigate to do our work well, instructors may choose to add furniture (desks, tables, chairs) to the space. In doing so, participants must not only remain equidistant from their identified partner, but they must do so in a more complex and crowded environment.