

A sixth sense

Level: Advanced

Timing: 90 minutes plus

Material needed: One copy of the student worksheets, Appendix and Vocabulary record per student

Group size: Any

Overview

This lesson plan for both pre-experience and in-work business students is based around an article first published in *Business Spotlight* Issue 3/2013. The article is about how to improve professional relationships with co-workers. It provides strategies, tasks for self-reflection and useful language suggestions.

The tasks in the worksheets relate to certain sections of the article. Tasks 1 and 2 should be done before reading, Tasks 3-5 can either be done while reading or after reading and Tasks 6 and 7 should be done after reading.

The teacher's notes provide suggestions for teaching and learning strategies as well as ideas on how to present the tasks in the classroom, any necessary answer keys and extension tasks (for in class or as homework).

Lead-in

These questions are meant to introduce the topic of the senses and to encourage students to discuss what a sixth sense might be or how it might show itself.

Key:

a. *sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch*

b. (suggested answer) *a special ability to feel or see things without using the usual five senses*

Pre-reading questions

Here students are asked to think about and discuss how they would answer the questions. As they read the article, students should compare their answers with the points made in the article.

Teaching and learning strategy: Taking responsibility for learning vocabulary

Key words and expressions tasks have not been included in this advanced lesson plan. Hopefully, by the time they have reached this level of language, the majority of students will have developed their own method of recording and learning new language. However, there is a danger that they will become distracted by unusual, and therefore low-frequency, words and expressions.

One way to get around this problem is to ask students to highlight or underline all the words and phrases in the article that they understand, or have heard before, but do not yet actively use. These would be the ones that they should try to learn and put into their active (rather than passive) language.

It is worth taking the time to allow students to decide what new language they think will be useful to them and come to a consensus as to what they are going to learn and use. This is also a task that can be set as homework. Comparing the students' suggestions as to what constitutes new useful language and expressions in the next lesson will also serve as a good revision task.

Observation

Students should read the paragraph and match the questions with their corresponding aspects.

Key:

	QUESTION	ASPECT
Visible aspects	What do they say?	Verbal behaviour
	How do they say it?	Paralinguistic behaviour
	What do they do?	Actions and skills shown
	How do they do it?	Working style
	What don't they say?	Non-verbal behaviour
Invisible aspects	What do they think?	Opinions and attitudes
	What do they feel?	Emotions and moods
	What do they want?	Objectives, needs and motivations
	What do they believe?	Values, principles and beliefs
	Who are they?	Sense of identity

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Assessment

This task refers to the Step 2: Assess section of the article. The students should work together and decide which type of person – Blue, Red or Green – is most likely to do the things described in the sentences.

Key:

Blue: b, e, f, j; Red: d, h, i; Green: a, c, g

Strategizing

Ask the students to work individually when looking at the opposites drawn from the Diversity Icebreaker model. They should mark where they consider themselves to be on the lines, e.g. Are they more practical or philosophical? They should then compare their responses about themselves with each other. How similar or different are they in their attitudes and characteristics?

Extension: Ask students should think about a co-worker who they have had difficulties or differences of opinions with and do the task again on behalf of that person, deciding how he or she would most likely answer. Comparing where they have placed themselves and their co-worker on the lines, they should be able to see where their major differences with this person lie (and hopefully do something about it).

Discussion

These questions give the students the chance to think about what they have read and talked about so far as well as to give their own opinions and offer any anecdotes or stories from their working lives.

Note: If the students all work at the same company, they may not be willing to answer the third question. You could make it clear that this can apply to relationships with past colleagues in a previous job.

Research

Students could explore these links as homework and report back at the next lesson on what they have learned.

Appendix

This section provides some useful vocabulary related to the article, including examples of questions to ask colleagues, ways to encourage conversation and methods of communicating with personality types Blue, Red and Green, as presented in the 'Diversity Icebreaker' tool. If there is no time to run through this in the lesson, it could be handed out as reference material.

Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all the new and useful vocabulary they have learned during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

Related topics on onestopenglish

For follow-up lessons on the same or related topics go to the following lesson plans in the Business section on onestopenglish:

Business Spotlight: Should you socialize with your co-workers?

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/should-you-socialize-with-your-co-workers/552158.article>

Business Spotlight: Fighting back

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/fighting-back/552062.article>

Business Spotlight: All together now

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/all-together-now/>

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1 Lead-in

Answer the questions below.

- What are the five senses?
- What might a sixth sense be?

2 Pre-reading questions

Before you read the article, think about how you would answer the questions below.

- What aspects should we observe in other people in order to understand them better?
- What different styles of thinking and communicating are there?
- What strategies can you use to build good relationships with others?
- How can we encourage people to be open with us, so that we can learn about them more quickly?

As you read the article, compare your answers with the points made in the article.

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by Bob Dignen

A sixth sense can be useful when we need to quickly form a good business relationship with people who we don't know very well. But the way we go about this is decisive, as Bob Dignen explains.

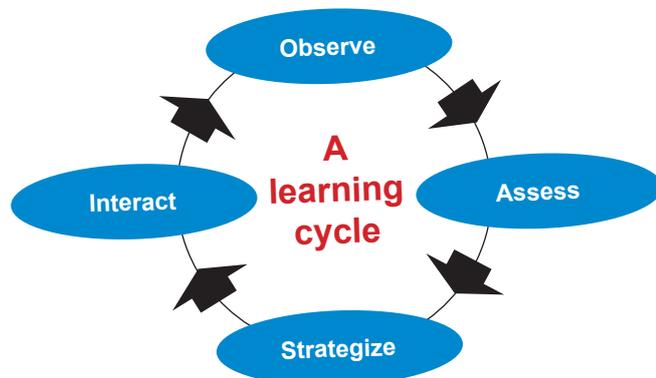
In the increasingly complex global business world, we have to interact with more and more people, but often less frequently and only superficially. At the same time, we have to deliver results together to tight deadlines. Building effective working relationships quickly has therefore become both more necessary and much more challenging.

Indeed, we need to develop a completely new talent – a kind of sixth sense for people.

A learning cycle

Many people love to play the role of amateur psychologist, analyzing their colleagues and clients. But developing a sixth sense is not about making these

kinds of judgements, which are often too confident and categorical. So, although we often need to make quick judgements, we also have to recognize that these are superficial – and should therefore commit to the following four-step learning cycle:



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Image: Macmillan Australia

Step 1: Observe

To understand others, we first need to observe them and to collect information. But what should we observe? A useful image is that of an iceberg, which is frequently used in intercultural training. Some aspects of other people's behaviour and personality are clearly visible, for example, the words they use, their tone of voice and their body language. But many aspects – possibly, like with an iceberg, the majority – are less obvious, such as their beliefs or motivations.

Step 2: Assess

After observing people, we need to be able to assess them in a quick and effective way. To do so, it is useful to have some kind of model or framework. In professional settings, many psychometric models are used to profile people, such as the Myers-Briggs or Team Management System (TMS) models. But such complex frameworks don't really help us to assess others when we meet them briefly and there is no opportunity to get them to complete a detailed questionnaire.

One simple tool is the 'Diversity Icebreaker', developed by Bjørn Z. Ekelund of Human Factors in Norway. Ekelund is a psychologist who has worked for more than 25 years in management consulting. The tool identifies three fundamental styles of thinking and communicating – called 'Blue', 'Red' and 'Green' – with the following characteristics:

Blue	Red	Green
cautious concrete fact-oriented logical practical precise organized loyal	easy-going emotional empathetic harmonious sensitive sociable warm	creative impatient independent philosophical provocative visionary

Source: Human Factors AS (www.human-factors.no)

Ekelund says that, although everyone has all three styles inside them and is capable of using them all, one style normally dominates

Improve your ability to judge others accurately

Judging people too quickly is risky. We have different moods at different times and we each have our own psychological and cultural filters. We often see the positive in people who comfort our own sense of identity and feel aggressive towards those who threaten it. A few simple rules will help you to improve your ability to judge accurately:

- **Know what mood you are in** when assessing others (bad moods don't lead to accurate judgements).
- **Manage negative perceptions carefully** (you may be guilty of 'projection' – blaming others for the faults you don't want to admit in yourself).
- **Be wary of positive perceptions** (you may like the person simply because they are like you).
- **Back up initial perceptions** (by asking for second opinions).

Step 3: Strategize

Now comes the hard part: to come up with a strategy for communicating and interacting with others in a way that engages and motivates them – and helps us to deliver the desired results. This does not necessarily mean simply being nice to someone or accepting their behaviours and values. Here are some strategies you can use:

a. Adapt. This is the approach usually recommended by management trainers. There is a strong logic to adapting: being flexible is an attempt to make others feel more comfortable and more motivated to cooperate.

b. Blend. Blending means developing a communication style that keeps the best dimensions of your natural style, while integrating components from other styles. For example, you might prefer to state the truth clearly and directly. Honesty is likely to be a shared value and should thus be retained. But in some situations, you may need to adapt your style so that you don't seem rude or disrespectful. Instead of saying, "You're absolutely wrong", you could say, "I understand your point of view but the facts are very different". In other situations, it may be all right for you to be direct, as long as others understand that your directness is an expression of honesty.

c. Co-create. This involves discussions with others in order to develop a common communication and working culture with agreed norms. This sounds attractive but it can be very difficult in practice. It

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works best if you keep the number of agreed norms to a minimum and check regularly to make sure that everyone is practising what they agreed.

d. Divide. This could be a spoken or unspoken agreement to vary the way things are done. For example: "We do it your way in your country. We do it my way in my country." Or: "In finance meetings, we talk detail. In marketing meetings, we try to look at the big ideas."

e. Enforce. It can happen that people upset others at work, don't listen, act selfishly, deliver late and shirk responsibility. Many forms of behaviour, attitudes and values can be destructive in the workplace. Unfortunately, some of the people involved are immune to feedback or coaching. One solution, if you have the authority, is simply to enforce your own expectations on them. This is not pleasant but it is an approach that may be necessary at times.



Image: PhotoDisc / Getty

Step 4: Interact

Next, you have to use your selected strategy to communicate with colleagues and to see how they respond. Do people react positively to your style? Do they listen and take your ideas on board? Do they understand your priorities and needs? Do they deliver on agreed targets? If you are getting a significant number of negative answers to these questions, there are a number of possible explanations:

- **Your assessment of the other person could be incorrect.** You need to observe them more closely, understand their communication style and develop a new strategy.
- **Your assessment was correct but your strategy is not working.** Perhaps your calculated flexibility is seen as superficial or weak. Maybe your intended toughness is seen as disrespectful. Think again and try something different.
- **There could be hidden factors driving this person's behaviour** – psychological, cultural or organizational. People may appear open and collaborative, yet in reality, live in a very different world. This dissonance

may become clear only over time. Cultural differences can also appear suddenly. Globally, we use common terminology, such as *leader*, *decision* and *urgent*. But words mean different things to different people and in different places. Finally, you may be underestimating the negative influence of other people in the background, such as the other person's boss.

Knowing me, knowing you

Getting to know others is a challenging process. But we can make the task easier if we model the openness and transparency we wish to see. If we make ourselves easier to know and to trust, we may inspire others to be more transparent with us about who they are, how they think and feel, and how they best like to work together. Here are four ideas for how to inspire openness in relationships:

- **Show your competence.** If people understand what you are good at, they are more likely to respect and trust you.
- **Talk about things you have in common** with other people. Beginning with safe ground allows you to approach aspects of problematic diversity more confidently at a later date.
- **Offer support for people.** If others sense that you care about them, they are more likely to confide in you.
- **Don't keep secrets.** Share information and your inner thoughts freely. This can encourage others to show their feelings and share their insights.
- **Ask for feedback** about your communication style. This encourages others to think about your working relationship.

Modern organizations throw people together in the most challenging and contradictory circumstances. Other people can be puzzling, fascinating, inspiring and frustrating. The trick is to observe, assess, work with different strategies, interact and try to keep learning. As you do this, you will develop a sixth sense for people that allows you to build relationships and take smart decisions faster.

BOB DIGNEN is a director of York Associates (www.york-associates.co.uk), which specializes in language, communication and intercultural training. He is the author of many business English books, including *Effective International Business Communication* (Collins).

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3 Observation

Read the paragraph below then match the questions with their corresponding aspects. Two sets have been linked for you.

If we think of other people as icebergs, we can create a framework of questions to discover more about their invisible depths. And as we observe more closely, ask questions and listen carefully, we can begin to draw some initial conclusions.

Framework of questions

	QUESTION	ASPECT
Visible aspects	What do they say?	Working style
	How do they say it?	Non-verbal behaviour
	What do they do?	Verbal behaviour
	How do they do it?	Actions and skills shown
	What don't they say?	Paralinguistic behaviour
Invisible aspects	What do they think?	Objectives, needs and motivations
	What do they feel?	Sense of identity
	What do they want?	Values, principles and beliefs
	What do they believe?	Opinions and attitudes
	Who are they?	Emotions and moods

4 Assessment

In the Step 2: Assess section of the article, Ekelund says that although everyone has all three styles inside them and is capable of using them all, one style normally dominates. Test your own ability to assess people using this model. Decide which type of person — Blue, Red or Green — is most likely to perform each of the actions below.

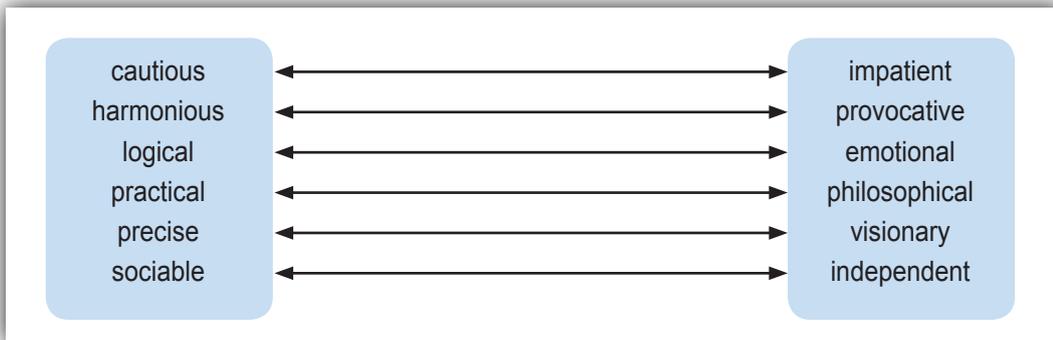
Assessing people: Who would do what?

- act independently to come up with a strategic plan
- say in meetings that the discussion needs to focus more on the current situation
- argue and defend their position quite aggressively
- ask if others would like some coffee
- point out that it's time for the next item on the agenda
- insist that research is done before a decision is taken
- fall asleep when figures are discussed in detail
- give positive feedback
- stress the impact of changes on the team
- ask what happens next and when

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5 Strategizing

Look at the following opposites drawn from the Diversity Icebreaker model. In which direction on each dimension do you need to show more flexibility to the different people you work with?



6 Discussion

Discuss the questions below in small groups.

- Why should we make the effort to get on with and try to understand our co-workers?
- Which methods specified in the article do you think might be useful for you at work?
- Have you ever used any of the strategies mentioned in the article to deal with a potentially difficult situation? If so, what was the result?

7 Further research

Explore the topic further using the links below.

- For more information about the 'Diversity Icebreaker' model, see: www.diversityicebreaker.com
- Find out about the Myers-Briggs Type Indicators: www.myersbriggs.org
- Learn more about Team Management Systems (TMS): www.tms.com.au
- Read about David Kolb's learning theory, which inspired some of the ideas in this article: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_A._Kolb

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Building relationships

by Bob Dignen

Here are some suggestions for the language you could use to build relationships. However, you should only use the language that you feel comfortable with in your work situations.

1. Using questions to learn about others

Asking questions is an excellent way to discover more about what is important to other people.

Finding out opinions and feelings

- What's your opinion on this?
- How do you feel about this?
- Is this idea convincing to you or do you still have doubts?

Understanding motivation, values and principles

- What's the most important part of this for you?
- What really matters to you here?
- To what extent is this a question of principle for you?

Clarifying work objectives

- What is the main objective for you here?
- What is your priority: cost or quality?
- What do you want from all this?

Negotiating working processes

- How would you prefer to do this?
- Who should do what?
- Shall we begin by ... ?

2. Inspiring openness in others

If others feel intimidated by too many questions, try giving information about yourself to encourage them to be open towards you.

Showing competence

- I have some knowledge in this area. I was responsible for ...
- I have quite a bit of experience in this from my time at ...

Identifying commonalities

- That's interesting. I have also worked in ...
- I think we have the same approach here.
- I agree with you that ...

Offering support

- If you need any help with ...
- Would you like me to ... ?
- Just let me know if you need help.

Sharing information and feelings

- Can I just brief you on ... ?
- I've received an update on ...
- I'm feeling worried / anxious / confident / frustrated about ...

Asking for feedback

- How are you finding the team so far?
- Is there anything you need me to change to make your life easier?
- How do you feel about the way we work together?

3. Applying the 'Diversity Icebreaker' model

Learn to communicate effectively with different types of people.

'Blue' type

Be grounded, practical and well-prepared. Talk about details and achievable targets with a clear cost-benefit focus:

- I've prepared a detailed agenda.
- The real benefit of this idea is ...
- To be more specific, the actual cost is ...

'Red' type

Be personal and enthusiastic. Focus on people and relationships. Show consideration and trust:

- How do you feel about this?
- I'm interested to hear your opinion about this.
- I think your idea is really good because ...

'Green' type

Give positive feedback on new and alternative ideas. Allow others time to reflect on the big picture without focusing too quickly on details:

- That sounds like a good idea. Tell me more.
- How could we do this differently?
- Shall we take a few minutes to brainstorm?

