



SOCIETIES – An Exercise in Being Different  
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**PURPOSE**

This exercise provides participants a means to personally **experience** how **visible** differences can impact productivity when systemic and personal barriers exist to those differences. Participants will have to make personal choices on how to manage an assigned task in an environment where subtle, systemic barriers have been created. The goal is to illustrate:

1. How systems drive behavior.
2. How systems are supported by the behavior of individuals (even those who do nothing to openly create them).
3. Why it is necessary to deal with systems as well as people in order to remove barriers.
4. How peer pressure and ambiguity can cause individuals to lapse into inertia and self-preservation when it comes to challenging systemic barriers.
5. How individuals and the organization flourish and prosper in environments where systemic and personal barriers are removed.
6. How achieving such an environment, while challenging, provides significant return-on-investment (ROI) for the effort.

**TIME REQUIRED**

A full day. (The exercise is conducted after the viewing of the videotape “A Class Divided”).

**EXERCISE OVERVIEW**

Participants are assigned to one of three groups. Each group is a self-contained society:

**Society #1**

This society is made up of predominantly well to do individuals. They are primarily professionals with well-paying jobs, living in a good neighborhood and fairly insulated in their own world. They live and subsist in an environment where nearly everyone they come in contact with is like them. Nearly all individuals in this society have two arms and two legs. There are one or two one-armed individuals and one or two one-legged individuals in this society.

**Society #2**

This society is made up of predominantly one-armed individuals. There are a few two-armed people in this society as well as some who cannot speak English, though they do understand it when spoken to them.

They are primarily hourly workers who spend much of their time at work. Their personal and social lives revolve mostly around their jobs, as they spend most of their time working any available overtime in order to make ends meet. Their world is a mix of many different types of people. However, while they have quite a bit of contact with two-armed people, they have few meaningful relationships with those individuals due to lack of ability to relate to them.

### **Society #3**

This society is made up of predominantly one-legged individuals and blind individuals. Some are both. There are a few one-armed people as well. This society is primarily unemployed who are seeking work. They adapt easily to any environment and are quite productive whenever they can find work. Few employers, though, want to risk hiring them for meaningful positions, and this results in an intense frustration. This frustration is often perceived by other societies as unwarranted rage.

Each society will interact with the other societies in the town of Johnsonville. Society #1 lives primarily in the beautiful rolling hills of the Harmonic Blade neighborhood. Society #2 lives primarily in the bustling neighborhood of Generator City. Society #3 lives primarily in the crowded Hemorrhage Section.

Each society will design its neighborhood, including where the schools are, where the shopping is, how the streets are laid-out and what services they have. This will include what the benefits and challenges are of living in that neighborhood.

Society #1 will coordinate and run a town meeting in order to determine what to do about the rising problems among the one-legged population. All societies will attend the meeting. However, only Society #1 will know the true reason for the meeting. They wish to do all they can to improve the plight of the one-legged people. Being sensitive to the chances that their motives may be misunderstood, they share very little of the true reason for the meeting.

Society #2 members will be invited to the meeting. All they know is that a town meeting is being held to address some needed improvements. Society #2 members will assume that the meeting is to improve conditions for them.

Society #3 members will also be invited. However, they will assume that it is for Society #1 members to announce improvements for their (Society #1) own betterment.

The town Council has membership from all societies, though skewed heavily toward Society #1. During the town meeting and during community interactions, individual society members will be given “life challenges” with which they will have to deal. For example, a teen has been arrested for DUI and the parents have to deal with the justice system and the police; someone has just learned that they have cancer and must get treatment; a member of one of the other societies has killed someone’s close family member. (These are only a few of the examples.)