

## SECTION 6: CRITICAL INCIDENTS

This section gives several examples of critical incidents or of situations which may become critical. These are generally designed for discussion of the reasons for the incident and the action to be taken and the language used. The intention is not primarily to provide answers, but to allow learners to apply what they have learnt in the course up to now in order to deal with the situations appropriately. This involves a combination of knowledge and skills. It is important to know something about culture types and culture standards to explain how the critical incident came about, and it is important to be open-minded and tolerant of cultural differences. However it is also essential to be able to react appropriately in the situation both in terms of behaviour and proper use of language. This should be the focus of the section. The aim is to build and maintain relationships through the use of appropriate language, taking into account cultural differences, while remaining non-judgemental throughout.

The worksheets in this section are largely for discussion and summary of what has gone before and therefore require fewer lead-in and follow-up activities.

Page	Title	Aim	Level
123	TABOO TOPICS	Dealing with critical incidents	1 & 2
125	CULTURES COLLIDE (1) (2)		1 & 2
128	AN UNEXPECTED REACTION		1 & 2
130	INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS		1 & 2
132	A TEAM-BUILDING DAY		2
136	AN INVITATION AND A CRITICAL INCIDENT		2

### REFERENCES

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Yvonne Knoll: “Currently Offered Intercultural Training in Germany and Great Britain. An Empirical Study”. In: Interculture Journal 2006/1.

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# TABOO TOPICS



## 1. Think

Interesting topics are often taboo! Do you like asking direct questions? Do you like it if someone asks you direct questions? Can you ask someone you have just met the following questions? What about

- a colleague?
- a friend?
- an older person?
- ... ?

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| a. <b>How old are you?</b>                 | g. <b>Have you ever taken drugs?</b>            |
| b. <b>Are you married?</b>                 | h. <b>Were your parents married?</b>            |
| c. <b>Do you love your husband / wife?</b> | i. <b>Which political party do you support?</b> |
| d. <b>How much do you weigh?</b>           | j. <b>Are you religious?</b>                    |
| e. <b>How much do you earn?</b>            | k. <b>Are you gay?</b>                          |
| f. <b>Are you a virgin?</b>                | l. <b>Why haven't you got any children?</b>     |

## 2. Discussion

Who can ask you these questions? How would you answer them?

Work in pairs. Ask your partner only those questions which you think appropriate.

1. *I hope you don't mind me asking, but ...*
2. *I'd rather not answer that (if you don't mind).*
3. *I know this is a bit personal, but ..*
4. *Why do you ask?*
5. *Can I ask you a personal question?*
6. *I'm afraid that's really a bit too personal.*

## 3. Discussion

Who can you say these things to? Who can say them to you?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| a. <b>I like your perfume.</b>                 | e. <b>You've drunk too much.</b>                         |
| b. <b>Please don't smoke in here.</b>          | f. <b>Your are not very good at cooking, are you?</b>    |
| c. <b>Those clothes don't suit you at all.</b> | g. <b>Your girlfriend/boyfriend has got a nice body.</b> |
| d. <b>You are a bit smelly today.</b>          | h. <b>Your trousers are undone.</b>                      |

## 4. Discuss with your partner:

- Are you a tactful person or are you more direct?
- Do you think being direct is a good or a bad thing?
- Do you believe that such things are seen differently from culture to culture?
- Can you give examples?

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**TABOO TOPICS**

**1. Think**  
 Interesting topics are often taboo! Do you like asking direct questions? Do you like it if someone asks you direct questions? Can you ask someone you have just met the following questions? What about

- a colleague?
- a friend?
- an older person?
- ... ?

a. How old are you?                      g. Have you ever taken drugs?  
 b. Are you married?                     h. Were your parents married?  
 c. Do you love your husband / wife?    i. Which political party do you support?  
 d. How much do you weigh?            j. Are you religious?  
 e. How much do you earn?              k. Are you gay?  
 f. Are you a virgin?                        l. Why haven't you got any children?

**2. Discussion** Who can ask you these questions? How would you answer them?  
 Work in pairs. Ask your partner only those questions which you think appropriate. Use the following expressions.

1. I hope you don't mind me asking, but ...  
 2. I'd rather not answer that (if you don't mind).  
 3. I know this is a bit personal, but ...  
 4. Why do you ask?  
 5. Can I ask you a personal question?  
 6. I'm afraid that's really a bit too personal.

**3. Discussion** Who can you say these things to? Who can say them to you?

a. I like your perfume.                      e. You've drunk too much.  
 b. Please don't smoke in here.            f. You are not very good at cooking, are you?  
 c. Those clothes don't suit you at all.    g. Your girlfriend/boyfriend has got a nice body.  
 d. You are a bit smelly today.              h. Your trousers are undone.

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AIM

To be able to deal with potential critical incidents using appropriate language without damaging the relationship.

LEAD-IN

Remind learners of the strategies for dealing with difficult questions and ask them the first questions on the worksheet.

WORKSHEET

Learners work in pairs discussing each of the sections and reporting back. Make sure they use the language given and do not only talk **about** the topics. They practise asking and answering the questions in pairs and then discussing their reactions.

BACKGROUND

*"In Germany (as in some other countries) directness is sometimes considered a positive feature of personality. If you say what you think you may consider yourself an honest, upright and reliable person - and vice versa, this is a widely held belief. What sometimes is underestimated*

*is the fact that some people would consider a certain kind of directness as impolite or even utterly unacceptable. It is therefore important to distinguish between 'honesty/dishonesty' on the one hand and 'polite/impolite' discourse on the other and to develop strategies which will be acceptable in most cultures. Here is an example from the world of business: "... in some cultures it is not acceptable to criticise people in front of others. This leads to 'loss of face'. It can also be not acceptable to show emotion at the workplace. Direct criticism, even in a one to one situation, is not acceptable here. There are times when criticism is necessary. ...[here are] three ways of dealing with the situation.*

1. *Blur the sender. This means that you don't criticise the person directly but do so through a friend or colleague.*
2. *Blur the receiver. This means that you mention the problem in front of the whole group rather than picking out an individual.*
3. *Blur the message. This could mean talking about a hypothetical case or asking an indirect question. ..."*

Robert Gibson. Intercultural Business Communication. Fachsprache Englisch Cornelsen 2000. p. 43f.

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## CULTURES COLLIDE (1)



Lukas was a German university student spending a semester at a university in California, USA. Before a class quiz, he prepared a piece of paper to help him in the quiz and showed this to one of his fellow-students. After that no-one was very friendly to him any more and he had rather a difficult time.

1. What happened?
2. What are the reasons for the reactions of the other students?
3. What was Lukas' mistake?
4. What should he have done?
5. What can he do and say now?

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## CULTURES COLLIDE (2)



Patrick was working for a German company doing business with Poland. Business was conducted in English and they seemed to get on very well. Patrick always enjoyed his short trips to Poland and was treated well by his Polish hosts. His Polish colleagues had always been very reliable about replying to emails and delivering on time so he was extremely surprised when for no apparent reason, there seemed to be nobody in the Warsaw office to deal with his requests and questions. He inquired if it was a national holiday and found that it wasn't. After three days or so Gosia got in touch with him and apologised, explaining that the Pope's death (Pope John Paul II) had meant that nobody could work properly. Patrick's immediate reaction was "You can't be serious!" After that, he was never treated in the same way again.

1. What happened?
2. What are the reasons for Gosia's reaction?
3. What was Patrick's mistake?
4. What should he have done?
5. What can he do and say now?

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## CULTURES COLLIDE (1) (2)

## TRAINER'S NOTES

**CULTURES COLLIDE (1)**



Lukas was a German university student spending a semester at a renowned university in California, USA. Before a class quiz, he prepared a piece of paper to help him in the quiz and showed this to one of his fellow-students. After that no-one was very friendly to him any more and he had rather a difficult time.

1. What happened?
2. What are the reasons for the reactions of Lukas' classmates?
3. What was Lukas' mistake?
4. What should he have done?
5. What can he do and say now?

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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH 16

**CULTURES COLLIDE (2)**



Patrick was working for a German company doing business with Poland. Business was conducted in English and they seemed to get on very well. Fredrick always enjoyed his short trips to Poland and was treated well by his Polish hosts. His Polish colleagues had always been very reliable about replying to emails and delivering on time so he was extremely surprised when for no apparent reason, there seemed to be nobody in the Warsaw office to deal with his requests and questions. He travelled if it was a national holiday and found that it wasn't. After three days or so Gosia got in touch with him and apologised, explaining that the Pope's death (Pope John Paul II) had meant that nobody could work properly. Fredrick's immediate reaction was "You can't be serious!" After that, he was never treated in the same way again.

1. What happened?
2. What are the reasons for Gosia's reaction?
3. What was Patrick's mistake?
4. What should he have done?
5. What can he do and say now?

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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH 17

### AIM

To discuss the reasons behind critical incidents and possible ways of dealing with them.

These two critical incidents deal with aspects of culture which are not evident or visible (belonging to B or C on the culture iceberg) and are therefore best discussed without a lead-in. Learners may not understand immediately what has gone wrong and should be encouraged to discuss various possibilities. Both incidents show how

dangerous and how damaging to relationships it can be to assume that values are the same in different cultures, in this case honour and religion.

### WORKSHEETS

Distribute the worksheet and ask learners to discuss the questions in pairs or groups.

### ANSWERS

#### Cultures Collide (1)

Lukas had not realised that cheating is regarded quite differently in the USA (and also incidentally in Britain and other Anglo-Saxon countries) from the way it is seen in Germany. Cheating is not a prank or a gentleman's crime in the USA, and although it does occur, it is not, to quote an American "an organised crime" or a "gang crime" in the same way as it is in Germany, and one does not boast about it or even admit it. Teachers and fellow-pupils alike regard it as something which is "not done" and if it is found out, it can lead to exclusion at school. This was the reason for the other students' reaction.

Lukas mistake was not realising that something like cheating can be viewed quite differently from culture to culture. He should have tried to find out about this before he went and should certainly not have boasted about his attempts to cheat. The situation may not be entirely beyond repair if Lukas attempts to explain the attitude towards cheating in German schools. ("I can see you are a bit shocked and I realise I made a mistake. In Germany we don't think that cheating is really that bad, it is more like helping yourself and is often done. But I understand that it is seen differently here.") He may or may not be accepted back into the group. This will probably depend on how much he was accepted in the first place. There is bound to be confusion about the fact that a seemingly honest person can do something like this (regarded as rather underhand).

#### Cultures collide (2)

Patrick expressed his surprise and disbelief rather too spontaneously, showing that spontaneous reactions are not always best in intercultural encounters. Gosia of course feels hurt that her deeply religious feelings and sadness at the death of the Pope are so little respected. Fredrick's mistake was expressing his astonishment. He should have accepted what Gosia said and said nothing, regardless of his real feelings about it. As in (1) there may be nothing he can do. However he can apologise and hope that his apologies will be accepted ("I would like to apologise for my remark recently. I see I was tactless. I didn't fully understand your deep religious feelings. They are just so different from ours which is why I was surprised. Please accept my apologies.")