

The background of the cover is a blurred photograph of two people in business attire standing in front of a large window with a grid pattern. The overall color scheme is a mix of light and dark blues.

EMPLOYEE AND LABOR RELATIONS
INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL

SHRMTM

SOCIETY FOR HUMAN
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Classism Isn't Classy:
Exploring Socioeconomic Diversity

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INTRODUCTION

This case study explores the socioeconomic differences among employees of a family-owned pool and spa contracting and supply store. The enterprise employs a total of 53 workers: 20 skilled workers from the middle class, 30 unskilled workers who hail primarily from the lower class, and the family of three who owns the store and whose roots come from upper class. Due to high employee turnover, customer service complaints, scheduling overruns, low morale and frequent miscommunication, the company owners decide to conduct a team-building exercise to create more synergy and cooperation among the staff.

Students will participate in the case study by forming three groups. Each group will represent a different socioeconomic perspective. The groups will respond to the questions as directed in the learning assignments that appear in the case study.

Please note that this case study is intended for international use. The three major social classes may be labeled differently in the U.S. than in other countries. In some countries the three classes are known as poverty class, middle class and wealth class. The instructor should be at liberty to change the way the classes are referred to to reflect the language and titles commonly used in their region.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Undergraduate students.

TIME NEEDED TO COMPLETE THIS CASE STUDY

Three modules of 45-50 minutes each.

LEARNING MATERIALS REQUIRED

Student Workbook and Instructor's Manual. Instructors should read the Student Workbook first before reviewing the Instructor's Manual.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the case, students will learn how to:

- Define and discuss the labels assigned to socioeconomic classes and become familiar with the values, behavioral norms, traditions, ways of thinking, beliefs and attitudes commonly held in lower, middle and upper classes, and identify the ways in which socioeconomic perspectives affect attitudes about work.
- Anticipate and proactively respond to class differences that affect workplace performance, productivity, employee retention, employee satisfaction and customer service.
- Recognize the potential for cultural collisions between members of the three primary socioeconomic classes.
- Be aware of incentives and benefits that appeal to members of each class and inspire employee loyalty and enhance employee satisfaction.
- Collaborate with others to create and sustain a work environment that capitalizes and celebrates socioeconomic diversity, which results in service excellence to an organization's internal and external customers.
- Recognize methods and strategies used to evoke organizational culture evolution to suit the needs and sensibilities of today's workforce.

FACILITATION OVERVIEW

This case study requires students to assume the role of a person from the lower, middle or wealth class as part of small group assignments. The case is set in a fictional company, Proud Peacock Pools, and is loosely based on situations experienced at an actual pool and spa company. The case is structured to avoid defensive responses from participating students, although there is always a risk of heated debate when diversity and inclusion issues are discussed. Class issues are seldom discussed publicly, and this can be an extremely sensitive subject, so require respectful contributions from students.

As the instructor, facilitate the case study using the following guidelines.

- The suggested answer to a question posed in a learning assignment often appears on the page following the assignment. Students should be instructed not to look ahead in their workbooks. Alternatively, pages can be distributed individually.
- Each of the six learning assignments requires either small-group or full-group discussions in response to the question(s) posed in the assignment. All small-group discussions should be debriefed with the entire class for optimum learning.
- To process small-group assignments, ask each group to volunteer its answer(s) and then ask if other groups had a different response. Entertain all unique responses and encourage further discussion where disagreement occurs. Allow approximately 10-15 minutes of debriefing time for each assignment.

FACILITATING EACH ASSIGNMENT

Below are sample responses and processing suggestions for each learning assignment.

Learning Assignment 1: Could You Survive in Any Class?

Below are three short quizzes adapted (with permission) from the book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. These quizzes present some of the skills needed to survive in poverty, middle class and wealth cultures. Please take a moment and check all of the skills you possess. Could you survive in any of the three classes?

Processing points: Have each student take the quizzes that appear on pages 10–11 in the Student Workbook. Ask students to tally the number of responses they checked in each of the three quiz sections. When students finish responding to the quizzes, process the outcomes by asking the following questions:

1. Which socioeconomic group are you best skilled to survive in?
2. When and how did you learn the skills that you possess?
3. What new skills might you need to acquire if you found yourself living in a socioeconomic community where you have few of the stated survival skills?
4. Are there any new skills that you would need to acquire that you might not be particularly interested in learning? If so, which ones, and why?
5. Do you think you would be accepted in the new socioeconomic community if you did not acquire the skills that others in the class possess?

Learning Assignment 2: Tenets of the Three Classes

Please divide into three groups, each representing a different social class. As a team, evaluate the table shown below about the social class you represent. Decide whether you think the descriptions listed are accurate or inaccurate. Be prepared to explain the rationale behind your decisions.

Processing points: Students will generally agree that the class tenets listed are observable in each class. If inaccuracies are noted, ask why the description is thought to be incorrect. Be sure to mention that some descriptors listed could occur in more than one socioeconomic class, but might be observed with more strength or frequency in one class than another.

Learning Assignment 3: Meeting the Needs of Internal Customers

As a full group, please discuss the following questions:

- Are there overlapping concerns that appear on the lists? If so, what are the issues common to all the groups?
- Could the solutions generated by one group present a problem for others? Identify the proposed solutions that might pose interpersonal or organizational issues for others.

Processing points: The purpose of this discussion is to emphasize that members from different social classes can have common concerns, although they may be affected differently by them. The answers to the questions posed in this assignment are answered in the context of the case on pages 16–18 in the Student Workbook. The six classifications of issues are listed, and yes, the solutions generated by one group could cause problems for those in other social classes. The Student Workbook gives potential solutions that neutralize class concerns to the extent possible.

Learning Assignment 4: Will It Work?

As a full group, please discuss the strategies developed at the Peacock Pools meeting and answer the following questions:

- Will the strategies improve employee satisfaction? Why or why not?

Yes. All employees were involved in developing the strategies and each strategy includes a factor that addresses the needs of multiple social classes.

- Will the owners of Peacock Pools benefit from making the proposed changes? If so, how?

Yes. The owners will experience increased worker satisfaction; lower employee turnover; reduced organizational conflict; preservation of resources; decreased absenteeism and tardiness; and enhanced worker safety that leads to potentially fewer workers' compensation claims.

- Will the customers of Peacock Pools benefit from the changes? If so, how?

Yes. Customers will be better served because they will not see behavior that interferes with their sensibilities. They will also get their pool or spa installed in a timelier manner due to increased worker productivity and will witness less conflict among staff members.

- Will the proposed changes create a more inclusive work environment and appeal to the needs of all three social classes represented at the company? Why or why not?

Yes. Workers will feel more valued, included and accepted if more of their personal and professional needs are met by the organization.

Learning Assignment 5: Respectful Communication

As a group, please discuss the following questions that pertain to the Respectful Communication Dos and Don'ts.

- Are the “Dos” and “Don'ts” fair to all employees of Peacock Pools?

Yes. Some employees may need to acquire more new skills than others, but all of the recommendations are directly responsive to the issues that have surfaced at Peacock Pools and all are sound respectful communication practices.

- Is it realistic to expect people to change the way they communicate naturally to conform to organizational expectations?

Yes. Employees are compensated for both their people skills and their technical skills at work. The people skills are needed to foster an inclusive work culture.

- How should the pool company make sure that everyone understands the guidelines for respectful communication?

The company should host a training session that allows employees to fully comprehend each “Do” and “Don’t” and provides employees with an opportunity to practice the skills.

- What needs to happen if someone violates the guidelines?

An employee who violates the guidelines should receive feedback from co-workers or a manager to remind the employee of the guideline that has been violated. The worker should then get a “do-over” and have a second chance to restate his or her comments in a more respectful manner.

Learning Assignment 6: Each One Teach One

Please return to your class-specific small groups and answer the following questions:

- How do the customer service solutions and organizational strategies benefit members of the social class you represent?

Poverty Class: Taking discarded items is no longer considered theft; life skills can be used to generate extra income, and these skills are acknowledged and valued by others in the organization. The barter club uses the survival skills of those raised in generational poverty and helps them include new resources in their network. The homework club will help children who might be in an overcrowded or substandard educational system to succeed with the help of the children from a more privileged class who have better educational opportunities. Impoverished families can learn to swim (a skill that those in poverty might not have an opportunity to learn) without the cost of swim lessons. Socialization opportunities will familiarize those of other classes with employees who hail from poverty class, and hopefully they will learn to enjoy the leisure activities common to classes other than their own. A more diverse selection of snacks will ensure that everyone is more satisfied. Providing free beverages to all employees will save them from future embarrassment by asking customers for drinks or from having to buy luxuries that they can’t afford, such as bottled water.

Middle Class: Using the casual labor board to post seasonal or occasional needs will provide the middle class with trustworthy household help at economical rates. They will have an opportunity to acquire and/or improve their barter skills to get needed items that won’t strain their budget. At homework club, middle class children will get an opportunity to share their academic prowess with others who may need a mentor or tutor, which will reinforce their own learning and foster greater self-

esteem. Free swim lessons for middle class children will provide an opportunity to acquire a skill at no cost to their budget-minded family. The social gatherings will help middle class families make new friends and learn new ways to have fun together. Free beverages and a diversity of snacks in the break room will be appreciated.

Wealth Class: The wealthy can use the casual labor board to find people they know and trust rather than hiring strangers to assist with domestic projects. The barter club will allow them to offer assistance to people they know rather than faceless others helped through charitable contributions. The homework club can use the skills of wealth class children and allow them to experience the personal satisfaction that comes with helping others grow. The free swim lessons will allow children who may not get a chance to socialize with children of other classes to mingle across class lines. The social gatherings will allow the company owners to refine the organizational culture by learning more about the customs, traditions, ways of behaving and thinking, and domestic situations of their employees. Providing employees with free beverages and diverse snack selections will incur loyalty and prevent embarrassing customer service moments without overtaxing the budgets of their employees.

- Are there other customer service or organizational strategies that could be added to Peacock Pools to further capitalize on the strengths of the social class you represent? Please create at least one more protocol or practice that would promote inclusion in the organization. (Refer to the chart on page 12 of your workbook to prompt your response.)

It is hard to predict what sort of responses students might generate to this question. The intent of the question is to get students to review the tenets common to each culture and recognize that each culture brings strengths to the workplace that can be capitalized on to reach organizational goals.

- Thank you for participating in this case study. To conclude the experience, please list the major learning points acquired by the members of your small group.

This question will bring closure to the case study and allow students to reflect on new learning derived from the experience.

At the conclusion of this discussion, review the recommended reading list and encourage students to explore some of these resources to further their knowledge of the effects of classism on self-esteem, workplace success, HR practices and organizational inclusion.

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