



Senior Scenarios: What Would You Do?

In this section we offer nine scenarios that examine issues that may occur in work situations. The scenarios are composites based on real situations that the authors have encountered in classes and the workplace.

Each represents problems faced by immigrant seniors, program directors, supervisors, and co-workers that could occur because of language or cultural misunderstandings.

We believe the scenarios will be helpful to SCSEP program directors and staff members who offer community service and employment opportunities to immigrant seniors, to those who provide ESL instruction, to those who contract for ESL services, and to those who are preparing to offer services to this population.

Immigrant seniors, who are learning about the culture of their new country, may also find the scenarios and the topics covered both useful and illuminating.

How to use the scenarios

Consider using the scenarios:

- As self-study exercises to identify strengths and challenges immigrant seniors bring to the workplace as well as ways of meeting challenges;
- As exercises to help program staff distinguish between individual employment issues and cultural misunderstandings;

- As group activities in which service providers facilitate discussions with staff who work with immigrant seniors;
- As problem-solving activities with the immigrant seniors themselves;
- As part of an orientation for staff working with immigrant seniors.

The scenarios are not meant to be an exhaustive discussion of all the issues that immigrant seniors bring to the

workplace, but rather as an orientation to a few key areas where they may be challenged.

As you go through these scenarios, you will find many tips that will help you pave the way for greater success for immigrant seniors and SCSEP agencies.

While each scenario has its own TIPS (Training and Information to Promote Success), there are a few that are worth considering before you review the scenarios.

The Memo and Mr. Mohammed

Setting

It is Sayeed Mohammed's first day as a SCSEP participant at the community center in a mid-size city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. As administrative assistant, his duties include photocopying materials for the Center staff and other clerical tasks as needed. He sits at the front desk and answers the phone when the receptionist is on break or at lunch. Additionally, he provides interpreter services to Pakistani clients who do not speak English.

Situation

Mr. Mohammed worked in the government in Lahore, Pakistan, where his job conferred a high status on him and his family. He can read and write English easily, but he has a little more difficulty understanding oral English, especially when spoken with an American accent. His supervisor, the receptionist Betsy Green, explains to Mr. Mohammed how to run the photocopier. She speaks English rapidly, explaining while she photocopies a memo. When she is done, she asks Mr. Mohammed if he understands. "Yes!" says Mr. Mohammed. Ms. Green then goes to lunch.

Donald Gregory, another Center employee in his early 30s, needs to get 15 copies of a memo made. Mr. Mohammed says that he will do it soon. Mr. Gregory nods and says he'll come back in 15 minutes to pick it up. When he returns, the copies have not been made. Mr. Mohammed says he was busy, but he'll do it soon. Mr. Gregory is a little perplexed because Mr. Mohammed does not appear to be doing anything. When pressed for a time when the copies will be done, he repeats "soon."

Mr. Gregory returns in half an hour. By this time, Betsy Green has come back from lunch. She overhears Mr. Gregory asking for his copies. Seeing they are not done yet, she picks them up and photocopies them for him right then, looking at Mr. Mohammed in exasperation. Mr. Gregory thanks her and walks away, not looking at Mr. Mohammed but shaking his head slightly.

Thinking about the situation

- What might be the reasons for Mr. Mohammed's behavior? Could any of them be the result of a cultural misunderstanding? Could any be due to a lack of familiarity with office technology?
- What kind of information might help Ms. Green understand Mr. Mohammed's behavior?
- What could Ms. Green do to help Mr. Mohammed improve his job performance?
- What additional skills or information does Mr. Mohammed need to improve his job performance?
- Is there another way that Mr. Gregory could have handled the situation?

The Teenager and Mrs. Samater

Setting

Six local groups share space at a community center in a large Midwestern city. The current tenants are a senior center that also administers the SCSEP program, an after-school homework and technology club for neighborhood children, a teen center, a small community gym, the community multicultural office, and a family health outreach program run by the local health department and the public schools.

Because space is limited and the children and teens are likely to be noisy after school, activities, space, and schedules are closely monitored. Many of the seniors participate in low-impact aerobics classes, eat lunch at the seniors program, and access routine health care through the outreach program.

Situation

Sahra Samater, 59, learned some English as a child in Mogadishu, Somalia, and has been able to start her work at the community center as a part-time custodian. Her supervisor, Mary Ann Franklin, is pleased with Mrs. Samater's punctuality and careful work.

Ms. Franklin has noticed, however, that Mrs. Samater doesn't seem to feel comfortable talking to people from other programs. Robert Briscoe, 17, one of the regular participants in the teen program, has been trying to talk to Mrs. Samater. Like many teenagers, Robert is a bit loud and brash because he is usually trying to impress his buddies with how cool he is. He has been following Mrs. Samater around when she is emptying the trash cans in the gym and common areas and saying things like, "Hey, Mama, want me to help you lift the trash? You look too old to do it."

One time, Robert said, "Why do you wear that towel on your head? It's too hot around here for that." He expected that Mrs. Samater would just joke back or at least tell him to be quiet.

Mrs. Samater is still doing her job well, but every day she is quieter, and she is no longer smiling, even at the little children.

Thinking about the situation

- How might differences in gender and age-related roles between Mrs. Samater's and Robert affect her job satisfaction?
- What would help Robert and Mrs. Samater increase their understanding of each other?
- How can Ms. Franklin help Mrs. Samater feel more comfortable in her assignment?
- Is there a way that Ms. Franklin can help Robert understand the impact of his behavior on Mrs. Samater?

Mr. Beltran's Social Isolation

Setting

The setting is a community center in a mid-sized city in the Southeast. Like many cities in the South, this city has experienced a rapid growth in the number of immigrants of all ages.

Situation

Jorge Beltran, 73, from rural Guatemala, has been a migrant farm-worker for more than 20 years. He ended up staying in the area after he became too frail to do heavy work at one of the local farms. Because he is alone and needs to support himself, he was referred to a SCSEP program.

Through the years, he learned very little English because he didn't need it on the farm. In fact, his first language isn't Spanish but a Mayan language. The program coordinator, Frances Mary McNaughton, knows that Mr. Beltran needs job training and English classes. She is worried about him because, although he was initially quite enthusiastic about working at the community center, he has recently seemed distracted and every day seems to have less interest in the programs available to him.

Because of the difficult and isolated life Mr. Beltran leads, Ms. McNaughton is worried that he is unable to fit into mainstream American life. Furthermore, she is beginning to feel awkward with Mr. Beltran. Just last week, Mr. Beltran attempted to kiss her when they were sitting together going over paperwork.

Thinking about the situation

- What might be the cause of Mr. Beltran's decreasing involvement with the program?
- What does Mr. Beltran need to know about social behavior on the job?
- What can Ms. McNaughton do to address her own discomfort?
- What can be done to improve Mr. Beltran's communication skills in English while simultaneously addressing his employment needs?

Mei Chen on the Line

Setting

Mei Chen, 58, came to the Pacific coast of the United States five years ago from the Guangdong province in China. She felt lucky to emigrate because, as a member of a non-government sanctioned religious group, she feared official disapproval or worse.

Mei Chen now lives in an apartment complex where several other Chinese families live. Monday through Friday mornings, Mei Chen and three other elder Chinese women take a 5:15 a.m. bus to their job at a community hospital cafeteria.

Situation

Mei Chen and her friends seem to enjoy working in the hospital cafeteria. Their supervisor, George Franks, admires the efficiency and hard work he sees in his elder employees, but lately he has been getting some complaints from other kitchen workers and some of the cafeteria patrons.

When Mei Chen and her friends are working together — cutting up fruit, pouring juice, cleaning up, or even serving on the line — they talk to one another in their native Mandarin language. Another employee, Louisa Dade, a local area native said, “Those ladies don’t know how to be friendly at all. They make my head ache — jabber, jabber, jabber — they sound like little Chinese chickens.”

One of the hospital administrators, Calvin Brown, told Mr. Franks, “I think that employing immigrant seniors is a good idea for everyone, but why don’t you teach them English and good manners before you send them over here?”

Thinking about the situation

- What can Mr. Franks do to improve communication between the immigrant seniors and other workers?
- What would help Mrs. Chen and her friends become more comfortable and a more integral part of the workplace?
- What would help Ms. Dade and Mr. Brown address their discomfort?
- What kinds of language skills might help Mrs. Chen and her friends?

Mr. Rubin's Expectations

Setting

The setting is a large multi-use community center in a mid-sized Midwestern city. Yosif Rubin, 61, came to the United States just before the break-up of the Soviet Union.

In the USSR, Mr. Rubin was a defense department engineer. When he came to the United States, he originally lived with his son and daughter-in-law, both of whom work in high-tech firms.

Mr. Rubin wasn't comfortable sharing the small condo with them and their two young children. He rented an efficiency apartment for himself, fully expecting to be able to pick up a part-time computer job himself. He wasn't able to get a job, and his income was very limited, so he enrolled in SCSEP.

Situation

Mr. Rubin studied German and English as a young man and he prides himself on being well educated. He is not shy when talking to Lynn Blackwell, his supervisor. In fact, he has told her many times how to reorganize SCSEP.

Mr. Rubin has told her again and again, "This program has inefficient system. You must to make it so that the wages are better. I was chief computer engineer in defense system in Ukraine. I know to organize more than you. Perhaps you just are social worker lady."

Recently, he attended an interview for a job entering data for a local food assistance program. Mr. Rubin said to the interviewer, "I don't understand USA — richest country in the world, but no food for poor. Must to have then stupid computer system for poor also?"

Although Mr. Rubin has the English and work skills to get a reasonable part-time job, he hasn't been offered one yet.

Thinking about the situation

- Why might it be difficult for Mr. Rubin to find a job? What linguistic, cultural, and personal challenges might Mr. Rubin be facing?
- What can Ms. Blackwell do to help Mr. Rubin become more employable?
- What can Mr. Rubin do to improve his employment prospects?

Mrs. Mangabay and Her Family

Setting

The setting is the neighborhood community center in a city in the Pacific Northwest. Luz Mangabay, 63, came to the United States from the Philippines. She had originally lived with her daughter, a nurse, who came here as part of the push to fill registered nurse (RN) positions in American hospitals.

The daughter acquired enough language for certification and began working in a local hospital. A year ago, the daughter went back to the Philippines to meet her old boyfriend. Now the daughter is married, pregnant, and her husband, her extended family, and she are staying at Mrs. Mangabay's small apartment.

Situation

Mrs. Mangabay has been working — first in a community service assignment and now as a part-time, unsubsidized worker — on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons as the receptionist at the community center.

She has a fairly good command of English. Her studies in school were in English, and she is fairly comfortable with American English, especially social English, having owned a small shop, a *sari-sari* store, outside Subic Naval Base in the Philippines.

She has been a favorite at work. She has never been absent. She is capable and friendly, and she works hard. However, twice last week she left early, once to accompany her daughter to the doctor and once to take the bus to meet another one of her daughter's in-laws at the airport.

Today Mrs. Mangabay told her supervisor, Derek Holmes, that she had to leave early to prepare a special traditional meal for all the relatives who are currently living in her small apartment. Mr. Holmes is concerned that an attendance problem is developing.

Thinking about the situation

- What factors may be causing the changes in Mrs. Mangabay's job performance?
- Is there a way Mr. Holmes can address the work-place problem without forcing Mrs. Mangabay to choose between job and family?
- How else can Mrs. Mangabay handle her family pressures? What kind of support might help her address her family and employment issues?

Keeping Mr. Ayala at Work

Setting

Jose Luis Ayala came to a large southwestern city 23 years ago from his native Chihuahua, Mexico. When he could no longer support his family, Mr. Ayala left the small farming village where he had been born. Because he was an undocumented immigrant, Mr. Ayala worked “under the table” at any agricultural, construction, or manufacturing job he could find.

In 1989, he obtained legal permanent residence status by filling out the proper government paperwork and attending 40 hours of English and civics class at a local adult ESL program. Those few weeks of class were the only formal education Mr. Ayala had ever received. He liked going to school, but once he had his immigration papers, he went back to working two jobs a day.

In 1999, Mr. Ayala hurt his back in a construction accident. This condition has been aggravated by osteoarthritis. Now, at 63, divorced, with his children grown and moved away, Mr. Ayala works 20 hours a week as a janitor at the YMCA in his neighborhood.

Situation

Everyone at the Y likes Mr. Ayala. In fact, he is a popular figure in the neighborhood at large. Because he is so popular and because the osteoarthritis is making it increasingly difficult for Mr. Ayala to perform his janitor duties, his supervisor, Suzanne Gomez-Smith, would like to make Mr. Ayala a desk clerk.

Although he makes mistakes, Mr. Ayala speaks English quite well. In this neighborhood, it’s also useful to speak Spanish. However, Mr. Ayala can barely read or write in either language, so he has difficulty writing down phone messages, filling out supply requisition forms, and registering new members.

Ms. Gomez-Smith is concerned about how losing his job will affect Mr. Ayala. She knows that he misses his children and speaks of them often and that the Y is his home away from home. She doesn’t want to fire him, but he can no longer do the physical labor required for janitor work.

Thinking about the situation

- What kind of training might help keep Mr. Ayala employed?
- What accommodations might help Mr. Ayala be better able to perform a desk job?
- What can Ms. Gomez-Smith do to help Mr. Ayala with some of his feelings of loss and loneliness?

Scenario 8

Mrs. Le and the Missing Messages

Setting

Ngoc Anh Le left her native Vietnam in 1993 and settled with her husband in a fast-growing city in the Southeast. Her husband, Tranh Nguyen, had been in the South Vietnamese Army during the Vietnam War and later had been a prisoner in a “reeducation camp” for six years. During those six years, Mrs. Le took care of her 4 children by working as a clerk and general assistant in a photography and movie firm in Saigon. Mrs. Le’s husband died in 1999.

When Mrs. Le became a SCSEP participant in 2003 (at age 57), her first community service assignment was to work in the administrative office of a local nonprofit program that matches low-income people with decent, subsidized housing. She received this placement because her spoken English was good if sometimes difficult to understand. Furthermore, she had experience working in an office.

Situation

Mrs. Le’s supervisor, Marianne Feldman, is the office manager. Ms. Feldman is in her early forties. Because she usually has morning meetings with case workers, she has asked Mrs. Le to manage the front office from 9 to 11:30 a.m. During that time, Mrs. Le answers the phone, takes messages, files new periodicals and recent case folders, sorts mail, and greets people who come into the office. When Ms. Feldman trained Mrs. Le, Mrs. Le assured Ms. Feldman that she could do the job — “No problem,” she said.

Ms. Feldman has been puzzled about what’s going on in the office in the morning. Whenever she asks Mrs. Le if taking care of the office by herself is okay or if she needs any help or a work task explained again, Mrs. Le smiles and says everything is fine. However, three times this week Ms. Feldman has received irate calls from clients who said they left messages for her, but she never got back to them. Ms. Feldman never saw any messages. Furthermore, she can’t find three important case files in the filing cabinet, and fewer requests for information about the housing program are logged in than there were before Mrs. Le worked there.

Ms. Feldman was sure that Mrs. Le was right for this position, but now she has her doubts.

Thinking about the situation

- What can Ms. Feldman do to determine whether Mrs. Le understands her job responsibilities?
- What would help Mrs. Le meet the needs of the customers more effectively?
- What can Ms. Feldman do to help Mrs. Le improve her job performance?
- What factors might influence Mrs. Le’s attitude about her job?

The Frustrations of Ms. Babcock

Setting

The Center for Aging Services is in a suburb of a large city. It is a big organization with many native-English-speaking SCSEP participants and many foreign-born seniors from Bosnia, China, El Salvador, Guatemala, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, India, Laos, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, Serbia, Somalia, Sudan, Turkey, Vietnam, and more. Seniors are required to fill out registration forms before they are eligible for services.

Situation

Today the seniors turned in their registration forms. The forms ask for name, address, phone numbers, date of birth, previous work experience, years of education, languages spoken, and days and hours available to work.

Moira Babcock, the SCSEP project director, prides herself on being efficient and has created a form that contains all of this information on one side of the paper. The printing is a little small and the space for writing is limited, but Ms. Babcock is concerned about saving paper and having neat, slim files.

Instead of giving the SCSEP participants the forms to fill out overnight, she gave them an hour this morning to fill them out while they were at the center. She wanted to make sure they wouldn't lose the forms when they took them home. This way, she is certain, they will fill them out and turn them in promptly.

As she reads their returned forms, Ms. Babcock finds herself getting increasingly upset. Some of the seniors have mixed up their first names and last names. Others have mixed up "day" and "month" on both date and birth date. Many seniors from Somalia and Afghanistan say they were born on January 1.

Many did not fill in their previous work experience, and she knows that most of the seniors worked before coming to the Center. The handwriting of most of the participants is hard to read. They have not been careful to stay on the lines; they have written too big for the space allotted; and she isn't sure what some of the responses say because the spelling is so atrocious. Not only the foreign-born seniors, but also some of the U.S.-born participants have made these errors. The more Ms. Babcock thinks about it, the more frustrated she becomes. She wonders why none of the seniors told her they were having difficulties filling out the form.

Thinking about the situation

- What management practices of Ms. Babcock do not match the needs of the immigrant seniors?
- What changes would make it easier for the seniors — immigrant and native born — to register and comply with the procedures?
- What could Ms. Babcock do to help address her own frustration?
- What skills or accommodations would help the immigrant seniors fill out forms?

