



Team-Building Activities: An Introduction

Overview:

This guide provides a range of activities and recommendations for building teamwork and energy among a group of people. The activities—which include physical, imaginative, and conceptual exercises—can be used in a variety of ways to build and maintain teamwork. These activities are outlined so that the facilitator of this workshop can use them to ‘train-the-trainers.’ This involves doing the activities and then debriefing and reviewing them with participants to point out key learning objectives.

Category:

General leadership and skill development; community building

Level:

Suitable for all levels (introductory to advanced), but is geared more at introductory level

Type:

Hands-on train the trainers or discrete activities for facilitator’s own use

Focus or Goals of this Guide:

- Introduce a number of activities that can be used by the facilitator or taught by the facilitator (for participants’ use with others).
- Assist facilitators/participants to understand the different purposes of team building activities—for example getting-to-know-you and context/message setting activities—and be able to lead each effectively.
- Facilitators/participants can also learn how to select and modify activities to fit the needs of the setting and group appropriately.

How to Prepare:

Read through all of the activities and become familiar with them.

- If you will be using a train-the-trainers approach, select which activities you would like to use for instruction and make necessary preparations.

- If you are just looking for activities for your own use, read them and get comfortable before implementing them yourself.

How to Do/Brief Outline:

- 1) **Getting-to-know-you:** activities that are designed for introductory meetings or team-building, but that also may be modified to use with groups at later stages of working together.
- 2) **Context/message setting:** activities that can be used to focus a group and build shared language and understanding of a goal or process. These activities are particularly useful for group leaders/facilitators (including administrators) for setting context and/or setting a message around how a group is expected to work together.

Note that while the activities are organized in this way, a skillful facilitator can modify virtually any activity to suit a different purpose. One of the goals of this unit is to better understand the “why” and “how” behind team-building activities. This document also contains information and suggestions for the facilitator about pointing out considerations in making modifications.

Select your purpose:

- **Train the trainers:** If you are doing this to train trainers, review the entire trainer guide and select one of each activity types to do with participants. Follow this trainer guide as an example, in order to understand how to interject the “doing” with the reflection needed to pull out salient points for trainers.
- **Build your own team:** If you are reading this simply to learn activities to use yourself with your team, also review all of the activities and then begin to incorporate them into your own meetings, retreats, service projects, and other times and places to build and maintain your team.

1 Get-to-Know-You Activities

Overview: Get-to-know-you activities, also known as icebreakers, can be used in a variety of settings and times to foster relationship building, trust, and teamwork. Often, these activities also are used to simply focus a group and/or set a particular emotional tone, like fun, creativity, introspection, sharing, or motivation.

Train-the-trainers instructions:

- 1) Review all of the following example activities and pick 1-2 to do in your training.

- 2) Make sure you're prepared to carry out the activity, including understanding its purpose, materials, attributes, and steps.
- 3) Make sure you yourself model the tips for effective delivery, which include:
 - Provide clear instructions
 - Speak loudly, calmly and slowly
 - Demonstrate where possible
 - Repeat the instructions (if necessary in more than one language or style) and check for clarification with the group before beginning
- 4) Do the activity with the group.
- 5) Run a focused debrief. Consider using the following questions as a guide:
 - Why or how did that activity work well as a get-to-know-you activity?
 - Did anything seem to go wrong? How did the group recover from that? Did the facilitator play a role?
 - What are some characteristics and/or attributes of this activity? What tone does it set? What might be some good opportunities to use this activity?
 - What did the facilitator (I) do to make the activity happen?
- 6) If you want, inject an element of hands-on practice into your training by having an activity (written up) that requires little material/time preparation on hand and allowing a volunteer from the group to lead its facilitation. Then debrief with the group in a manner similar to that above. This allows for the group to get engaged in talking about their own issues related to team building, such as being comfortable in public speaking, giving clear instructions, and facilitating a debrief.

Build your own team instructions:

- 1) Review all of the following example activities and pick 1-2 to do in your training.
- 2) Make sure you're prepared to carry out the activity. Make any modifications you need to suit the purpose, tone, setting, etc.
- 3) Do the activity with the group, effectively modeling the tips for delivery.
- 4) If appropriate (e.g., you want to elicit group feedback or process the experience) run a focused debrief about the activity or transition into the next activity.

NAME TOSS

Purpose: This warm up game is a quick way to focus a group on learning each other's names.

Materials: a ball or something soft to throw

Attributes: works well with a group of 6-14 who doesn't know each other at all (e.g. a frosh service day or first retreat); fun and playful; can be goofy; captures the groups attention; good for engaging resistant participants; great for youth; does not work with very large groups, unless divided into groups of less than 14 members

Rules:

- 1) Ask the group to gather in a circle, preferably standing. Explain that you will say your name and one adjective that describes yourself before tossing the ball. For example "Charlie...Chummy." Then throw the ball to someone else in the circle. The person who catches the ball needs to repeat what the tosser just said then add his or her own adjective and name (e.g., "Chummy Charlie", "Regal Roberta").
- 2) Demonstrate this once before beginning. Check for clarification. Encourage people to stay focused and make sure that everyone in the circle gets the ball at least once.
- 3) Start the game. If someone drops the ball or forgets a name, pleasantly help fill in the gaps and keep it going. This is not a test. Generally, the game will start going faster; that's okay.
- 4) After a few minutes during which everyone in the group should have been passed the ball at least once (then group members start remembering each others' names and adjectives), you can stop the game.
- 5) A twist: after you stop the tossing, you can ask if anyone believes they know everyone's name and would like to volunteer going around the circle saying them. Usually, this will rally a positive spirit within the group, cheering on their peer to do so successfully.

I DON'T KNOW

Purpose: This warm up game is great for a smaller group of people (or in triads in a large group) when people already know each other a little bit (names, roles, etc.) but haven't taken the next step to learn more.

Materials: A watch. No other materials are needed, but there does need to be sufficient time for each round (roughly 3 minutes per person or 10 minutes total).

Attributes: Works well with a group who has begun to know each other but perhaps not had the opportunity to slow down and learn more. Examples include (1) a group in the middle of a retreat, (2) at the middle of a project for a group that meets only periodically, (3) as a refresher for a group that is stuck. Tone should be inquiring and respectful. Space needs to allow for triads to not be overwhelmed by noise from other groups. This can also be done as a brief warm up for a pair (for example in a meeting), perhaps between project manager and volunteer, two colleagues, or mentor and mentee. Usually is very refreshing and interesting.

Rules:

- 1) Explain that the group is going to do a brief warm up activity called “I Don’t Know,” designed to learn more about each other. Ask the group to break into groups of 3 (2-4 can be done as well). Explain that there are rounds for each member of the group. During each round, the other members of the group will focus on one person. Each person will have time (30-60 seconds, as called by facilitator) to get to know the other person better by alternating with statements beginning with “I don’t know...” Give the following example:
 - “I don’t know if you have any pets.”
 - “I don’t know what is your favorite color.”
 - “I don’t know if you like your job.”
 - “I don’t know what sign you are.”
 - “I don’t know where you live.”
 - “I don’t know if you like Chinese food.”
 - “I don’t know what things you like to celebrate.”

Reassure the group that this isn’t hard - don’t think too much; it’s just a stream of consciousness flow. The person listening doesn’t have to remember everything, just pay attention. Then she or he will have the opportunity to say things back. It doesn’t matter if you can’t remember all of them, just share what you feel comfortable sharing. That would be like:

“I have a dog. I like blue. I love my job, but sometimes I feel tired by it. I live in the south of the city. I like Thai better than Chinese. I love to celebrate my team’s accomplishments, especially over dinner and dessert.”

- 2) As facilitator, you cannot participate, since you need to keep time and make sure that for each person, there is a round of “I don’t know” statements followed by the person’s responses.
- 3) That’s it. Do the rounds. Then, if you’d like, bring the groups’ attention back together and ask for comments (“What did you learn?”).

SHOE GAME

Purpose: This is a quick, quirky game that is great for large groups, say of 20-150. It’s excellent for retreats, large trainings, and other events.

Materials: None, except for a few prepared questions you want to group to exchange.

Attributes: Works well within settings that are programmed or part of a longer series or workshops, since this activity has a mildly disarming quality. Works well in setting a tone for a large group or subtly preparing them for what may be even more “risky” content later (e.g., it’s a great warm up for a diversity training, when you can say, “Hey, we asked you to take off one shoe now - that’s just the beginning for what may be involved

in sharing of yourselves this weekend.”). Doesn’t work well with people in uniform (who are all wearing the same kind of shoes).

How to:

- 1) It’s best to have an open space in the middle of the room for this exercise, such as a room set up in large circles. If not, you may ask everyone to get up (if they are seated) and create this space (move chairs, etc.)
- 2) Ask everyone to remove one shoe and throw it into the middle of the room. Explain that then each person should take a shoe that is not their own. Then, each person’s role is to find the owner of that shoe. Keep in mind also, that someone is going to find you with your own shoe. In doing so, you will meet two people ~ one whose shoe you have and one who has your shoe.
- 3) That’s not the whole story. This is more than a shoe exchange ~ it’s a chance to meet and learn more. Explain to participants that when they encounter a person to exchange a shoe, they should exchange information too. Create and use 1-2 simple questions that suit the purpose of your gathering like, “What is your name and why did you join this program?” Keep in mind that you can be programmatic and judicious in your choice of questions, in order to set a tone with the group. They can even range from funny to introspective.

PERSONAL CORNERS

Purpose: This is a slower, more reflective warm up activity, especially suitable for smaller teams who can benefit from spending time allowing for each person to express him or herself creatively. This is accomplished by having people draw their own “personal corners” conveying aspects of their backgrounds, values, and aspirations in drawing and writing.

Materials: Plain paper, markers, colored pencils, or crayons.

Attributes: Great for a core team (e.g., staff or volunteers who will regularly work together). Brings out people’s artistic and reflective attributes, which can be great for reaching both quieter and more expressive participants. Builds self-introspection. Gives the group something to walk away with and reflect on continually ~ can even be hung on the office wall.

How to:

- 1) This works best at a table where you can gather participants and have materials (pens and paper) available.
- 2) Explain that as part of a way of getting to know each other, each person has the opportunity to create a visual representation of some of one’s personal values. You can show one as an example or just make a basic representation of what to include, like this:

A hero/heroine or someone who	Your areas of interest for learning
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has inspired you	(academic, personal, or with project)
Your sense of where you want to be in five years	What drives you to be involved with this service work

Of course, you can modify these suggestions to fit your project, group, tone desired, etc.

- 3) Give people 10-15 minutes to do their own creation. Encourage people to be as creative as they want to be; they can use words, drawings, images, etc.
- 4) After this time, have each person present his/her "personal corners." You may want to post them up. Make sure each person can speak in the manner they choose to, without interruption from the group.
- 5) Wrap as appropriate, bringing the group's focus forward to the next activity or providing a sense of closure with comments.

2 Context/Message Setting Activities

Overview: Context/message setting activities are frequently just familiar games or creative activities that can be done in a purposeful way. These activities can replace a speech or more didactic approach with the opportunity for the group to focus on certain ideas and expectations. These kinds of activities help group leaders and/or facilitators establish a tone, focus the group, and in other ways move through a process.

Train-the-trainers instructions:

- 1) Review all of the following example activities and pick 1-2 to do in your training.
- 2) Make sure you're prepared to carry out the activity, including understanding its purpose, materials, attributes, and steps. You will want to elicit these comments from participants during the debrief.
- 3) Make sure you yourself model the tips for effective delivery, which include:
 - Provide clear instructions
 - Speak loudly, calmly and slowly
 - Demonstrate where possible
 - Repeat the instructions (if necessary in more than one language or style) and check for clarification with the group before beginning

- Have your own messages and context-setting information prepared
- 4) Do the activity with the group.
 - 5) Run a focused debrief. Consider using the following questions as a guide:
 - Why or how did the activity work to set context and/or get across a message? What seemed to be the message?
 - What else (e.g., more intangible) did the activity allow to happen (e.g., a time for facilitator to observe the styles of participants, etc.)?
 - What are some characteristics and/or attributes of this activity? What tone does it set? What might be some good opportunities to use this activity?
 - What did the facilitator (I) do to make the activity happen?
 - 6) If you want, inject an element of hands-on practice into your training by having an activity (written up) that requires little material/time preparation on hand and allowing a volunteer from the group to lead its facilitation. Then debrief with the group in a manner similar to that above. This allows for the group to get engaged in talking about their own issues related to team building, for example being comfortable in public speaking, giving clear instructions, facilitating a debrief.

Build your own team instructions:

- 1) Review all of the following example activities and pick 1-2 to do in your training.
- 2) Make sure you're prepared to carry out the activity. Make any modifications you need to suit the purpose, tone, setting, etc.
- 3) Do the activity with the group, effectively modeling the tips for delivery. Generally, follow the activity with a focused debrief about the activity and your own context-setting, or restatement, of what things the activity seemed to elicit. See the specific activities for examples.

HUMAN KNOT

Purpose: This is a physical challenge game that is often effective in helping a team to be more aware of its own individual member and group dynamics in problem-solving. This is done through a challenge that is often not solved by the team during the time allotted.

Materials: None, but space must accommodate size of team to be all "knotted up" holding hands and then trying to untangle themselves.

Attributes: Works well with a group of 8-13 people. Larger groups can be sub-divided and work in a big room, like a gym. Is a great component of a series of team building activities (a physical game, complemented by other activities that are imaginative, verbal, etc.). Be aware of whether

group will have any members who are physically challenged. Excellent for diverse groups as a way of channeling their focus.

Rules:

- 1) Ask the group to gather in a circle, standing. Have each person shake right hands with someone else in the circle, but not let go. Then, have each person shake left hands with someone else in the circle, again not letting go.
- 2) Now the group is effectively tangled into a knot. Explain that in the next 10-15 minutes, the group's goal is to untangle the knot, without breaking hands (in any sense) at any time. The facilitator(s) will act as observer(s), watching the group's work.
- 3) As facilitator, be a silent observer while the group attempts to untie their human knot. You can note observations on a card/post it, such as comments made, who speaks and who doesn't, etc. Remember as facilitator, it is your role to be objective in your observations.
- 4) If you've never seen human knot, you might be wondering what this looks like ~ basically people move around a lot as they attempt to climb over, under, and around each other to untangle. It is possible.
- 5) If the group successfully unties the knot without breaking hands in the time allowed, people will likely cheer. If not, members may experience frustration. Either way, be prepared to debrief with the group. Some suggested questions are:
 - Ask how the team felt to accomplish the task. If not, how it felt to not complete the task. Does this ever happen to a team?
 - Did anyone take the lead? How was that leadership expressed? Were there multiple expressions/forms of leadership? What did people observe?
 - Did everyone talk? Was everyone listened to?
 - If the team has been together for awhile, you can pose the question of whether this exercise reflected the prevalent dynamics of the team.
- 6) After taking comments and reflections from the group, you may steer this conversation towards broader topics that the exercise's purpose links to, such as problem-solving, styles of problem-solving, styles of leadership, observation and listening, meeting or not meeting time, etc.

ZAPPER

Purpose: This game is a simple modification of the popular childhood game (known as zap, murder, or queen); in this context it functions well to help people focus on each other

Materials: None, but space must accommodate size of team to be in a circle, shoulder to shoulder.

Attributes: Works well with a group of 8-13 people. Larger groups can be sub-divided and work in a big room, like a gym, with different small group facilitators. Is a great exercise to set the tone of non-verbal communication and focus.

Rules:

- Ask the group to stand shoulder to shoulder in a circle.
- Now explain that one person is going to be the Zapper. The Zapper can take out other people with a wink. However, the Zapper wants to be sly and not reveal him or herself easily. People need to stand and make eye contact with each other. If you are zapped, with a wink, then you have to bow out, as if you've been zapped. You can scream or make a noise, and let it be known. However, you don't want to out the Zapper, so you may psyche people out.
- You can have the whole group try to guess or name a group of guessers. For this, one (or a few) person(s) leave(s) the room. They will be guessers, trying to identify the Zapper before everyone is out.
- Signal the Zapper by walking around the circle and explaining that the person who you squeeze hands twice (all with hands behind) is the Zapper. Then, signal the start.
- This is a quick, simple game. It's fun. The point is fairly straightforward; you can debrief with a simple question:
 - What does this game make people think about communication?
- After taking comments and reflections from the group, you may wrap by suggesting that non-verbal communication and focus are important elements of communication and teamwork.