The Tower Project

An Exercise in Leadership and Work Team Effectiveness

University of Minnesota

Diversity Institute
The Tower Project

Summary

The Tower Project is used to help people shift their frames of reference and encourage teamwork to accomplish a task. This exercise gets at issues of team-building and cooperative learning. Participants will be broken into small groups and asked to work on a project together. The project is building a tower using the materials provided by the facilitators.

Background

"Together Everyone Achieves More" (TEAM) is an acronym that drives home the idea that working together is more beneficial and productive than working alone. "The Tower Project" is a hands-on exercise that allows participants to experience the idea of teamwork while learning how to shift frames of reference and roles, in order to accomplish a task.

We often approach situations with one idea or plan in mind, having difficulty conceptualizing and validating other possibilities. When co-workers or teammates offer ideas that differ from our own, sometimes we are not as receptive to their different points of view. This may cause a breakdown in the cohesiveness of the group directly affecting the accomplishment of the task at hand. For one to be open to different ideas, they must first be able to shift their frame of reference, which often is not easily done. Other breakdowns can occur with fluctuation in availability of resources, or as individuals leave or join teams. Communication and validation are integral parts of an effective team. Team members must be able to communicate with one another to exchange ideas. This only occurs when an environment has been created in which team members feel comfortable sharing their ideas. Validating the individual and their ideas is what helps create such an environment. This simulation offers the possibility of addressing a great number of learning concepts including but not limited to conflict resolution, effective team building, multicultural work teams, identity development, institutional and individual marginalization and discrimination, inclusion and exclusion of those new or different, etc.

Materials

Easel Paper  (approx. 27 inches X 34 inches)  1 Roll of Masking Tape
Paper Plates (approx. 100)  Notebook paper w/ pencils
Procedure

Divide the group into teams of 3-6 participants (depending on overall size of the group). Make a conscious effort to bring together diverse groups before beginning the task. Ask the groups to use the writing paper and pencil to record information about the team, such as:

1) Team name
2) Team logo
3) Team members (and short bio's)
4) Something of interest to the team members
5) Team members' preferred / perceived role in a work setting, such as in this exercise.
6) List the top five characteristics of an effective team / leader in order of importance.

This introduction portion should take approximately 20-30 minutes, however, each group should have ample time to answer each question. Record and post around the room, each team's name, and top 3 characteristics of an effective team. Offer the opportunity to have dialogue around any issues of the suggestions they may have come up with.

Facilitators' should now begin to explain the parameters of the task, i.e., building the tower. The instructions should be given similar to the format below:

"You will be building a tower in collaboration with the members of your team. This tower must meet specific structural requirements to be considered for placement. The tower must be:

- freestanding, unattached to anything and able to withstand a light breath of air from one of the facilitators.
- built using only the materials provided to you by the facilitators.
- at least 5 feet in height.

You will be given exactly 10 minutes to discuss with your group what you plan to do. During this time, you may not touch or handle the materials in any way. If you are suspected of handling or touching the material in any, said item may be removed / decreased at the facilitator's discretion.

After the 10 minute planning session, you will be given 20 minutes to accomplish your task. It is imperative that you remain respectful and engaged during this time as the facilitators will be observing you and may, at their discretion, penalize your team or members of the team if they are not adhering to respectful and engaging practices.

At the end of the 20 minute working session, towers will be judged and a winner will be awarded previously agreed upon prizes."

Upon delivering the instructions, open the floor to general questions. There is a strong possibility that questions about teams working together will be asked, to which the initial response should be 'no'. However, this will prove to be an important processing point later.
whether this question comes up or not. Facilitators should not, however, spend too much time on the open question, and should keep the group focused on the 3 requirements of the tower and allow them to be creative around those three stipulations. Articulate that towers will not be judged on looks, or usefulness, but only on the 3 requirements of the tower.

One of the keys to the successful processing of this exercise is using necessary incentive to create the type of competitive tension necessary for some of the important dynamics that will almost always unfold as the exercise progresses. This could range from collecting $1 from each participant indicating to them that that would be the prize for the winner, to providing t-shirts of some sort.

During the tower building phase, there are many actions the facilitators may choose to take which affect some of the themes and processing points one may wish to touch on. Because there are so many variables to this portion of the simulation, we leave much of these decisions to the individual facilitators depending on personal levels of comfort, training and experience. It is extremely possible that facilitator actions may evoke a wide range of emotions including, in some participants, a great deal of frustration or anger. As stronger emotions are evoked, the need rises considerably for the facilitator to have proper experience in facilitating conflict resolution and creating safe environments, so that the source of emotions may be shared, validated and learned from.

A. Unequal resource allocation:

This issue can draw many parallels to a multitude of societal issues around the concept of a "level playing field". By initially giving out unequal amounts of the resources to different groups, issues of sharing of resources as well as coalition building may be interjected the dialogue.

B. Marginalization of communities and individuals by institutions:

Here, by "targeting" teams to both reap the benefits, and suffer the consequences of just 'being', great parallels can be drawn to what many communities and individuals experience throughout the world. Facilitators may pick any characteristic to assign privilege or discriminate against: from the team name, to individual members' outspokenness. Once the tag of 'target' or 'agent' has been assigned, facilitators should interact with those groups with actions that clearly indicate their status with the institution. Examples include: asking a team to comment on the dress of one of the facilitators. When the team has responded with glowing positive remarks, the facilitator may react hostilely and remove some materials for 'lying' to them - removing materials from one group and redistributing them to another group. Facilitators may ask questions of different groups, and regardless of response, may remove materials and redistribute those materials to other teams. These actions are sure to create some conflict and tension, and facilitators should be prepared to validate those feelings, yet not allow it to take away from the process of the exercise. If a participant is showing many signs of frustration and hostility, facilitators should not rule out removing them until the debriefing phase.

C. Inclusion and exclusion of new group members:
By switching team members midway through the exercise, the group will have an opportunity to explore what happens when we have new people join our work teams; what feelings / emotions are evoked when relationships are formed with team members and they leave (or are removed). Facilitators should attempt to identify some of the more "active" members in each team and switch those members between groups.

A sub-topic that this will allow debriefing of is to explore what happens when these new members join teams with names / logos representative of the original members.

All of the above variations may be made at the facilitators discretion and the readiness of the participants to be engaged in dialogue around these issues in such a high-context manner. The theme of working collaboratively across difference should remain a key component in the process.

**Debriefing**

Below are a set of processing questions and points that may be used to facilitate dialogue on this exercise. As with most activities of this sort, this list is not exclusive, and experienced facilitators should draw on their experience to help guide the dialogue to address the needs, concerns, and goals of the group.

**Emotion Questions:**
- Name 3 different feelings you experienced during the simulation -- indicate when in the simulation you experienced the feeling and keep your feeling descriptors to one word per feeling.
- What did it feel like to be taken off of a team or added to a new team?
- What did it feel like when team members were removed from or added to your team?
- What did it feel like to have resources taken away, be reprimanded, etc.?
- What did it feel like to gain additional resources, be praised, etc.?
- Did the simulation feel "fair"? Did anyone win or loose?

**Process Questions:**
- Describe the experience as you planned your tower without being able to touch the materials
- (to teams as a whole:) In addition to experiencing different feelings, describe what else happened when a team member was removed and replaced with someone originally from another team. How did your team respond to new members? How did this impact the team process?
(to individuals who were switched:) Describe what you experienced when you were removed from one team and put on another. How did different teams or team members treat you during that process?

- Did any of the teams work together or share resources, or deliberately impede the work of another team?

- How were group members with physical disabilities included or excluded in your team process? (Or in future tense if no people with physical disabilities participated.)

**Linking Questions:**

- Did every team have access to the same resources? How was/are resource allocation decided upon?

- What happens when resource availability fluctuates?

- Did switched people ever become "members" of the team they were moved to? How was/is that evident?

- Why do you suppose we spent so much time developing a team identity before starting work on our towers? Did the team identities impact any team performance? How or why?

What other thoughts do you have about how this simulations applies to our every day lives?