

#stringtheory

Exploring hidden connections

Context

What makes a team, a team?

This is a group exercise for around ten people. Research suggests teams be no larger than nine members, but you can play with a few more. The objective is to get participants to think about what it means to be a team and to experience how connections and team structure affect the ability of people to perform as a team: a whole, greater than the sum of its individual parts. Use this exercise to help your team see the hidden connections that create a team.

Supplies

One ball of string, preferably nylon twine.
A4 folder
5 of your business cards

Instructions

1. Please read all the instructions before running this exercise
2. Begin by assembling your group in a circle, each person standing to face the centre of the circle
3. Allow about a foot of space between each person
4. Open your string and find the loose end
5. Choose a participant and ask them to hold the string like this: the ball of string in their dominant hand and the loose end in the other hand.
6. Ask this participant not to let go of the loose end of the string. This is critical
7. Explain the following game mechanics.

Whoever holds the ball of string will tell the group something about themselves, such as, "I have a daughter under two" or "I play guitar." They will keep sharing information about themselves until another participant shares the same trait.

When the other player recognises a shared trait, they will hold up a hand and say, "Yes, that's me!". The speaker will then pass or throw the ball of string to the other player while still holding on to the loose end.

You will now have one person holding the end of the string and another holding the ball with a line of string running between them.

- Ask players to keep the lines of string taught at all times. No sagging string, please.

Now the holder of the ball of string repeats the process.

They will now tell the group something about themselves such as "I am training for a half marathon" or "I love to watch French films." They will keep sharing information about themselves until another participant shares the same trait. When another player recognises a shared trait, they will hold up a hand and say, "Yes, that's me!". The speaker will then pass or throw the ball of string to the other player while still holding on to the loose end.

Repeat this process until each person in the group has, at least, two lines of string connecting them to other players. By this point, you should have a web of string connections between members of the group.

Remember to keep the lines of string taught.

**Participants must NOT talk about work. Explain that this is information is not relevant.*

Concept

Teams solve complex problems where individuals would become overwhelmed. They achieve outcomes that are not possible alone: Putting a man on the moon, cracking the Enigma code; decoding the human genome. These teams had inspirational leaders and wicked problems to solve and it took a team to get there.

Teams need to know who is on the team and who is not and your players and the string connections should make this clear. They also need clearly delineated authority: to know where their authority begins and ends. Teams need a clarity of purpose and that purpose must be engaging and inspiring. Take some time to think about how these concepts are communicated and exposed through this exercise.

When we truly collaborate, we can become more than the sum of our individual parts. When this happens we generate a third hidden entity - it's palpable, you can feel it in a great team but it's hidden, it defies description and quantification. This exercise is an interesting way to try to shine some light on that third entity

Initial Debrief

Now explain to the group that these lines of string embody the connections that make a group into a team. These are the connections that hold a team together and allow it to have a shared understanding and to support a shared purpose or goal.

Ask the players to tug a little at the strings they hold, or to loosen the tension a little. Let the group do this for a few moments and then ask the group "Can you feel the connections?" "Do you feel like a single entity?"

Explain that unlike in normal life we can now see the hidden connections that bind us as a team and that we will now explore this idea further. Continue to explain that teams are formed to work together towards a common purpose or goal. A goal that cannot be achieved by any individual alone.

Instructions Continued

Take an A4 folder or not too heavy large book and place it at the centre of the web of string.

- Explain that this folder represents the team's core purpose; the outcome they must achieve. Scatter your business cards on top of the folder and explain that these represent the key challenges the team will meet and solve on their way to achieving their purpose.
- Ask the team to variously tug and loosen their connections as would happen in the ordinary course of their work life, all the while being mindful of their purpose.

Now choose the person with the most shared connections and whisper in their ear that they must let go of their string and take several steps back from the team.

- Exclaim in a loud voice that one of their teammates has become disengaged.

At this point, some business cards or the folder may fall off. If the cards fall off start talking about the difficulty the team now has solving problems and meeting its challenges. If the folder falls off, you may proceed to debrief around the team's now lack of purpose (see debrief section) but don't let the group drop the string - there is more! If not, continue disengaging person by person until the folder lies on the floor.

The idea here is to get the folder to fall off by removing the least people possible. Removing people from one side of the group creates an unbalanced group both

physically, so the folder drops more easily, and metaphorically teams can become unbalanced, consider this in your debrief.

The folder should now have dropped to the floor - the teams purpose is lost.

- Exclaim in a loud voice that the team can no longer achieve their core purpose

Take some ideas from the debrief section and debrief around the team's now lack of purpose.

When you have finished the discussion on lack of purpose, explain that you will now carry on.

- Explain that disengagement is infectious and once a few team members are allowed to disengage more will follow.

Continue removing players until you have two or three people left holding the strings. They should be pretty much opposite each other. Now, ask a disengaged team member to try to rebalance the folder between the remaining players. They will fail, or perhaps not even try as it is obviously not going to work.

- Explain that in truly dysfunctional teams a few members may try to take control at the expense of the team.

Now everyone drops the string and you proceed to debrief

Final Debrief

The key to debriefing this game is to ask questions of the players. You want to find out what they experienced and how that might relate to teams and teamwork.

- How did they feel when a team member let go of their connections and became disengaged?
- How did this disengagement of team members affect the team?
- How did this disengagement of team members affect the milestones and the teams purpose?
- Why is disengagement infectious? Is it because it is easier not to collaborate?
- Would it have been easy to re-engage team members once they were disengaged?
- What is more expensive - engagement or disengagement?
- Explore different types of expensive - emotional, time, money, etc
- How is it to see for the first time the invisible entity (the web of connections) that is in effect the team?
- Why is this entity important to the team?
- Is this entity actually the team?
- Can you be a team without this entity?
- What if you have/had remote team members who stood five feet away.
- How would that affect the team?
- What did the team feel like with only two/three members engaged?
- Ask what players noticed?
- How did the team feel about members with fewer connections?
- What changes could they make at work now?
- What will they do differently at work now?

Common Questions

Q: What if two people shout "Yes, that's me!"?

A: In that case, the player holding the ball of string must decide who to pass the ball of string to.

Q: What if we run out of string and someone in the group has no connections?

A: This makes for an interesting debrief with the group: How does it feel to be that person? How does the group feel about it?

Q: We have remote people on our teams

A: Have people join the game but stand five feet or more away.

Acknowledgements

I created this exercise for the closing keynote on team potential that I gave at the Agile Business Conference 2015 in London. I was asked to finish the conference on a high and the feedback I received was positive so I thought I should share the exercise with the wider community. Please feel free to use it as you see fit. Ask different questions. Add things, take things away. Experiment. When you do, please let people know you have modified it from the original. Please mention where the game came from:

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I would love to hear from you if you use the game. Let me know how it went. Send me photos. Tweet your experiences with #stringtheory #game and above all have fun.

When I ran this the first time it was with over 200 people in groups of about 10 so I asked friends to help facilitate. I would like to thank them here for their facilitation skills and generally being the kind of people who pitch in with a smile. Thank you!

In no particular order they were:

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