

Helium Stick

Sometimes Called the “Tent Pole” Exercise

Introduction:

This exercise can be de-briefed many different ways. It is an example of “how a team does anything is how a team does everything.” You can debrief using the 14 factors from the Team Diagnostic™ model. You can also use it as an opportunity to talk about Team Toxins — the communication styles that corrode team relationship over time.

Objective:

Lower the stick all at once to the ground. Achieve a result together!

Set Up (Optional):

Have one person come up and, using the simple instructions, lower the pole to the ground. An example of leadership in action. Big round of applause.

Then: (or start here)

Gather the team in two groups on each side of the pole, facing each other, close enough to shake hands.

Everyone’s hands in this position: index finger pointing straight, not bent. Palms facing down. The rest of the fingers and thumb in a fist.

Create a “zipper” of hands at waist level, alternating with the person standing next to them. This creates the bed that the stick will rest on.

Have participants spread out along stick. When they are set, place the stick on the extended fingers and let participants figure it out. You may need to regroup a bit (invite team to start over with fingers back at waist level) until they get focused enough to proceed. Continue to monitor that the team members are following the rules.

Rules for this game:

- Your finger must stay in contact with the stick at all times — finger out, nail up, thumb under
- No gripping, holding, cradling, pinching the stick. If done, team must start again.
- You may remove your fingers once the stick or your hand is completely on the ground

Debrief (Team Toxins version):

- The very first moment, when you realized the stick was going up, not down, where did your attention go?
- If you were one of those being blamed, what was your response?
- Whose fault was it that the tent pole was not going down?
- How does this show up at work?
- What’s the impact over time? How does that affect you? What’s your response?

This establishes the presence of blame, defensiveness and sometimes, stonewalling. This provides the segue into a discussion / exercise exploring the four Team Toxins.

Debrief (Team Dynamics / 14 Factors version):

Share observations and demo what you observed in playful manner.

Explore:

- Where did you see the patterns of your team communications play out? How did it help or stop progress?
- Where was leadership?
- When people suggested different ways to do the task, what was the team's response?
- How do you handle the unexpected? (ambiguity and degree of difficulty)
- How would you score your team on _____ (insert any of the 14 factors)?
- In what ways was this a team effort? Not a team effort?
- Compared to the qualities of a "Best Team" (refer to the flip chart page) what was present? What was absent?
- What rules did the team make up? (that instantly became norms)
- What was going on in your mind and did you make it transparent (share)? Why or why not?
- How do you behave when things get tough? What is the impact on your team mates?

Notes:

Depending on tent pole lengths optimum teams are 8-12. The exercise can be done with up to 15...and it's easier for teams of 6 or less to actually get the pole to the ground.

The stick does not contain helium. It's a collapsible

tent pole. What happens is that the collective upwards pressure created by everyone's fingers tends to be greater than the weight of the stick. So, the more a group tries to accomplish the goal, the more the stick tends to "float" upwards. It's a counter intuitive solution which is common in systems work. For pictures and more description check out:

→ <http://wilderdom.com/games/descriptions/HeliumStick.html>

→ <http://www.teambuildingusa.com/indoor-team-building-game-helium-pole.asp>

→ <http://www.indiana.edu/~nca/challenge/proheliumhoop.htm>

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