

Ball Game

By Bonnie Cooper

Overview

'Ball Game' is a lively and interactive exercise with learning outcomes in the area of managing change and transition. Participants form a circle and throw balls to each other, establishing a pattern. Further balls are introduced to add complexity and participants added or withdrawn from the group to show the effect of personnel changes in a well-established team.



20 - 45 minutes.



Groups of 8 - 14.



- o 5 – 6 balls per circle formed. These should be of various shapes, sizes and weight.

Playing the Game

Begin by forming the group into one or two circles. Before you provide any directions or explanations, select 2 (small groups) or 3 (larger groups) volunteers and ask those individuals to leave the room. Make sure that they go to a place where they cannot hear your directions. Ideally however, you want them to be able to hear general group noise as the exercise proceeds.

Next, give directions to the group:

'Your objective is to establish a pattern within the circle, throwing the ball to each other without stopping and always using the same pattern. Everyone must catch and throw the ball once only in each cycle - you cannot throw the ball to the person beside you. Once your team has established the pattern with one ball - let me know and I will be introducing more balls to the team. You must always keep the balls going no matter what and quality/success is defined as never dropping a ball. No matter what happens, keep the balls going and do not allow them to touch the floor!'

This is akin to providing a clear role description or task outline, ensuring the group achieves a level of competence and comfort, then introducing more complexity. The group will start with mistakes, then correct themselves and achieve a high level of comfort first with a single ball, then with more. Play the role of coach with encouraging comments: *'You're doing great!'; 'That's OK - just pick it up and keep going - you're getting better and better.'; 'Remember to keep the ball going no matter what!'; etc.*

Once the group has achieved a reasonable level of competence and comfort with the first ball, add another one making sure they achieve success and feel comfortable before adding additional balls up to three or four in total, depending on available time and the level of confusion that can be tolerated. Next ask the people outside to re-join their groups. Tell them they are to simply go and join the circle but cannot stand beside each other - don't give them any other directions.

Introducing new group members will have various impacts. While constantly telling the group to *'Keep the balls going no matter what!'* and *'Don't drop the balls, whatever you do!'*, observe how the group does or does not incorporate the new members. Also observe how the new members deal with their situation. Usually there is bedlam, or the group completely ignores the new folks.

When this has gone on for a while, select 2 or 3 *key* members of the group, tap them on the shoulder and ask them to leave the group immediately. They do not have to go far - ask them to stand aside and help you observe what happens.

When 'old' members start to leave, real bedlam ensues! Usually, no-one has the big picture - people remember who they got the ball from and who they threw it to and when one of those folks leave, they have no idea what to do - and no-one else has time to do anything! Once again, you are constantly telling the group to '*Keep the balls going no matter what!*' and '*Don't drop the balls, whatever you do!*' Observe behaviors and actions.

When you feel the group has 'had enough', call the game, ask people to return to their seats and begin the debrief.

Debrief

Participants usually relate to this game! Most organizations are experiencing lots of change/transition and what's expected is not always clear. New team members may be joining your group and there may not be sufficient time to orient them or tell them what is happening. Some 'new faces' may take an aggressive, accommodating or passive approach to uncertainty. And we sometimes forget or ignore people with critical pieces of information.

An effective debrief would include a review of the chronology of the game:

What just happened? We started out with a specific assignment and we got pretty good at it!

Then what happened? New people came in.

How did you handle that?

To the new people:

What was it like waiting outside the room?

What information were you given before you joined the group?

What did it feel like to join the group?

What did the group do?

Back to the whole group:

Then what happened? People started leaving.

How did you handle that?

To the people who were asked to leave: *How did you feel when you were asked to leave?*

Once the facts of what happened are established ask the group(s) to look at these questions:

- What did we do well?
- Where/when did we get stuck?
- What would we do differently next time?
- Does this represent our workplace in any way? If so, how?
- Key learnings . . . for the day's activities/work and for back at work?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bonnie Cooper

www.TeamManagementSystems.com

trainingsupport@teammanagementsystems.com

Bonnie Cooper currently holds the position of Managing Director of Team Management Systems Inc. She is a management development professional with over 15 years experience in training, development and coaching in both the private and public sectors. Bonnie holds a Master of Business Administration from the Ivey Business School, University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario. She worked extensively with the General Electric 'Work-Out!' process prior to joining KPMG as a manager in their consulting practice in 1992. Since 1995, in her work as an independent consultant, the Team Management Systems tools quickly became a key component of the management and team development services provided by Bonnie and her TMS accredited colleagues. She is a coauthor of *'Breaking New Ground: Venturing into Social Enterprise'*, Thames River Publishing, 2001.