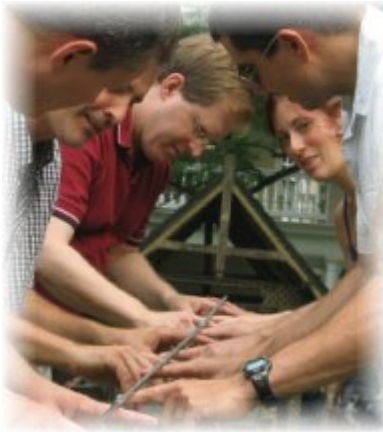


Helium Stick

Description of a Team Building Exercise (notes created by Wilderdom.com)



Equipment

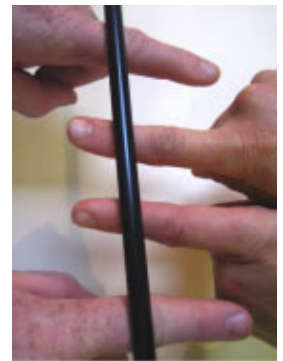
1 thin, light-weight, 10 ft stick with activity guide & facilitation notes

Summary

Deceptively simple teamwork activity. Form two lines facing each other. Lay a long, thin rod on the group's index fingers. Goal: Lower to ground. Reality: It goes up!

Group Size

8 to 12 ideal, but can be done with 6 to 14



Time: Total time ~25 mins

- ~5 minute briefing and set up
- ~10-15 minutes of active problem-solving (until success)
- ~10 minutes discussion

Facilitation

- Line up in two rows which face each other.
- Introduce the Helium Stick- a long, thin, lightweight rod.
- Ask participants to point their index fingers and hold their arms out.
- Lay the Helium Stick down on their fingers. Get the group to adjust their finger heights until the Helium Stick is horizontal and everyone's index fingers are touching the stick.
- Explain that the challenge is to lower the Helium Stick to the ground.
- The catch: Each person's fingers must be in contact with the Helium Stick at all times. Pinching or grabbing the pole is not allowed - it must rest on top of fingers.
- Reiterate to the group that if anyone's finger is caught not touching the Helium Stick, the task will be restarted. Let the task begin....
- **Warning:** Particularly in the early stages, the Helium Stick has a habit of mysteriously 'floating' up rather than coming down, causing much laughter. A bit of clever humoring can help - e.g., act surprised and ask what they are doing raising the Helium Stick instead of lowering it! For added drama, jump up and pull it down!

- Participants may be confused initially about the paradoxical behavior of the Helium Stick.
- Some groups or individuals (most often larger size groups) after 5 to 10 minutes of trying may be inclined to give up, believing it not to be possible or that it is too hard.
- The facilitator can offer direct suggestions or suggest the group stops the task, discusses their strategy, and then has another go.
- Less often, a group may appear to be succeeding too fast. In response, be particularly vigilant about fingers not touching the pole. Also make sure participants lower the pole all the way onto the ground. You can add further difficulty by adding a large washer to each end of the stick and explain that the washers should not fall off during the exercise, otherwise it's a restart.
- Eventually the group needs to calm down, concentrate, and very slowly, patiently lower the Helium Stick - easier said than done.



How Does it Work?

- The stick does not contain helium. The secret (keep it to yourself) is that the collective upwards pressure created by everyone's fingers tends to be greater than the weight of the stick. As a result, the more a group tries, the more the stick tends to 'float' upwards.

Processing Ideas

- What was the initial reaction of the group?
- How well did the group cope with this challenge?
- What skills did it take to be successful as a group?
- What creative solutions were suggested and how were they received?
- What would an outside observer have seen as the strengths and weaknesses of the group?
- What roles did people play?
- What did each group member learn about him/herself as an individual?
- What other situations (e.g., at school, home or work) are like the Helium Stick?
- More information on [Facilitation](#) and [creative debrief and processing tools](#)

References

- Booth Sweeney, L. & D. Meadows (1996). *The systems thinking playbook: Exercises to stretch and build learning and systems thinking capabilities*. The Turning Point Foundation.
- Gass, M. A. (1999). Lowering the bar. *Ziplines: The Voice for Adventure Education*, Summer, 39, 25-27.
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