



Pipeline Instructions



Pipeline is a high-energy exercise ideal for exploring teamwork under pressure. It demonstrates the importance of communication and coordinated effort when resources are scarce, and that we must often find ways to improve existing processes. You can also use it to energize a group first thing in the morning or right after lunch.

How does it work?

The group is tasked with transporting a small ball through a pipeline that is constructed using half pipes, which the participants themselves are holding in place. From start to finish, the ball must keep moving, it cannot be touched, and it must always roll in one direction. The group will have to start over if they fail at any point.

Just like in the real world, resources are scarce. There are more people than there are half pipes, so the group must be completely engaged, well-organized, and constantly coordinating with each other. You can increase the difficulty by adding participants or by lengthening the distance from start to finish.

What do you need?

People (min / optimal / max): 6 / 16 / 30

Time for Activity: 10–25 minutes

Materials: 6 half pipes made of durable plastic, 2 wooden balls, 1 set of instructions

Workspace: Large open space indoors or outdoors at least 32 x 26 ft, or a hallway or corridor 45-300 ft long

Instructions

1. To prepare for the activity, determine where you are going to stage it. Select either a single open space where participants can stand in a circle, or a walkable route such as a long hallway between two meeting rooms. You can include the meeting rooms as part of the route. If you are outside, choose a site with firm ground such as pavement or grass so people do not slip while they run.
2. Establish a start and finish line in your space, and place a bucket or basket at the finish line to catch the ball.
3. Invite the participants to stand beside each other and distribute three pipelines and a ball to the first three people. Not everyone will have a pipeline. You can distribute four or more pipelines if your group includes people who are not able to move quickly. The more pipelines you use, the easier the activity.
4. Explain the goal of the activity in general terms. Say something like, *“Your task is to transport this ball to the finish line as a team using only the pipelines and nothing else.”*
5. Outline the rules:
 - Each person can hold only one pipeline at a time.
 - Hold the pipeline in the palms of your hands, face up.
 - You may not touch the ball with your hands.
 - When the ball is passing through your pipeline, stand still for the best results.
 - Do not allow the ball to stop. It must keep moving in the same direction – toward the finish line.
 - The ball must not roll backward.
 - The ball must not fall out of a pipeline.
 - You must let everyone in the group take a turn holding the pipeline before you hold it a second time.
 - The task is complete when the ball drops into the bucket or basket at the finish line.
6. Give the group 5-10 minutes to practice before the real activity begins. Say, *“It is alright to break the rules right now, but once the real activity begins, any broken rule means you will have to start all over again at the start line.”*

7. Stand at the start line, and drop the ball into the first half pipe.
8. Observe the activity. Give the group enough time to complete it without your help. If you must intervene, ask everyone to put the pipelines on the ground, and steer the group toward a solution-based approach by asking:
 - What steps toward a solution have you taken so far?
 - What has worked well so far?
 - How can you consolidate that?
 - What still needs some attention?"

If the group is focused on the problem instead of the solution, try to create some emotional distance and say, *“Let’s imagine we have a group here that is trying desperately to solve a problem. You are the group’s advisors. How can members of the group improve their communication and coordination to meet their goal?”*

You can also go to the finish line and say: *“Let’s imagine you have already reached your goal. Can you look back with hindsight on how you did it, and explain what worked?”*

9. Lead the debrief, noting the group’s responses on a flip chart. Here are some sample questions to ask:
 - What was the key to success in this exercise?
 - What were some of the more helpful steps you took to complete the task?
 - What was your problem-solving strategy?
 - What roles emerged during the exercise?
 - What role did communication play?
 - Where can you see parallels to your current situation?
 - How can you put into practice what you learned from this activity?

Variations

Parallel Tracks

In this variation, have two teams line up parallel to each other. The goal is to get both balls to the finish line at the same time. This challenge adds a new dimension of interdependency and requires a higher level of coordination. Each team must be aware of the other's progress and be able to adapt, changing their speed while keeping the ball moving in one direction.

Common Sense Caution

This activity requires participants to pass plastic pipelines, move fast, change their position and sometimes even run. Some participants may experience dizziness, nausea, vertigo or headaches, and may fall or stumble as a result. If a participant suffers from balance problems,

vertigo, dizziness, lightheadedness or orthopedic problems, he or she should refrain from participating in this activity.

Participants who are pregnant or suffer from back pain or other orthopedic injuries should consider refraining from participating in this activity.

Choose the room or area for this activity carefully. Participants will move around and could lose awareness of their environment as they focus on the exercise. Choose a room or area free of steps, posts, furniture, debris or other potential trip hazards. The floor should be dry, level and stable.

Participants should not wear high heels or unstable shoes as this activity is highly dynamic and fast-paced.