



StringBall



StringBall is an exercise in communication, team interaction and project management. It demonstrates a common workplace dilemma -- that the people who 'see' the work (have access to information, manage projects, etc.) are not always the ones who 'do' the work, and that seamless communication between the 'seers' and the 'doers' is imperative for good teamwork. You can use it to address management / employee communication, leadership styles, information shortages and project visualization.

How does it work?

With some participants blindfolded, the group must work together to move a ball balanced on top of a metal ring from one wooden pedestal to another. The blindfolded participants each hold a string attached to the ring, while the sighted direct them where to move it. The sighted are not allowed to touch the blindfolded players or the strings, and can only use verbal instructions to lead them. If the ball falls, the group must start all over.

What do you need?

People (min / optimal / max): 4 / 9 / 12

Time for Activity: 15-45 minutes

Materials: 2 wooden pedestals, 1 stainless steel ring with 8 strings, 1 ball, 1 wooden egg, 8 blindfolds, 1 set of instructions

Workspace: A large open space at least 40 x 40 ft

Instructions

1. To prepare for the activity, create the two pedestals by screwing the wooden posts into the bases. Set the two pedestals 30-60 feet apart, and choose one as the starting point and one for the finish. Place the metal ring over the starting point, set the ball or egg on top the wooden post, then pull the strings away from the ring as far as they will reach. You can detach individual strings if you have fewer people than strings.
2. Ask your group to gather at the site of the activity (easier) or in an adjacent space where they cannot see the start and finish (harder). If you start at the activity site, ask participants to stand in a circle around the starting point. If you are in an adjacent space, your group will walk to the activity after the next two steps.
3. Divide the group into two -- the blindfolded and the sighted. Give blindfolds to about half the participants, but set a few blindfolds aside for later (as you may need to ask some of the sighted to put them on during the exercise). Depending on your group size, you should start with two to five sighted participants.
4. Explain the goal of the activity. You can say something like, *"Your task is to work as a team to move the ball while it's balancing on the metal ring from one wooden pedestal to the other."*
5. Outline the rules:
 - Only the blindfolded can move the strings attached to the ring, and only by holding the balls at the end of the strings.
 - The sighted must instruct the blindfolded how to move the strings.
 - The sighted cannot touch the strings or other participants.
 - No string can be shortened.
 - If the ball falls, you must start over.
6. Start the activity. If the group is in an adjacent space and must walk to the starting pedestal, ask the sighted to carefully lead the blindfolded participants to the activity. Make sure there are no tripping hazards.

7. Observe the activity.
8. Try not to intervene, if possible. If the group reaches an impasse, give them a chance to find a solution by themselves. But if they are stuck, ask them to set their strings down, and offer them some encouragement. Ask, *"What problem-solving steps have you tried so far?"* and *'What has worked well, but what needs to be improved?'"*

You can also let the blindfolded group remove the blindfolds and walk to the finish. Say, *"Let's imagine you just reached your goal and can look back with hindsight. Tell us how what you did to succeed."*

9. Lead the debrief, basing the conversation on your original intent for the activity. Here are some sample questions to ask:
 - During the activity, who played which roles?
 - What part of the activity was the hardest and how did you succeed?
 - What role did communication play? How did the blindfolded and the sighted communicate?
 - If you were blindfolded, did you feel supported?
 - If you were sighted, how did you feel about your role?
 - Where do you see parallels to your experience at work?
 - How can you apply the insights from this activity to your work in the future?

Variations

- When leading this activity with managers and staff at the same time, have them switch their real life roles. Blindfold the managers, and have the employees lead them. This allows participants to step into each others' roles and see things from a fresh perspective.
- Each time the ball falls, you can blindfold one of the sighted participants to teach the team about the consequences of poor communication.
- Adjust the difficulty of the exercise by placing the pedestals on uneven terrain, putting one pedestal on a desk or placing an obstacle such as a chair between the two pedestals.
- Play outside with a raw egg!

Common Sense Caution

This activity requires participants to move up and down, kneel, squat and move around on their feet. 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 or sit in a chair while participating.

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.

StringBall includes potential choking and strangulation hazards, such as strings and small balls on the end of strings, and should not be used with children. Please limit usage to adults and use with caution.