

Too Many Balls in the Air: Leadership Systems

Overview

TIME	MATERIALS	SETUP
60 MINUTES	3-7 BALLS OR OTHER OBJECTS	[OPEN SPACE]

Topic:

Reflecting on change and shared leadership in complex systems.

Audience:

Individuals interested in developing their leadership skills. Works best in groups of 10-20.

Conceptual Aim:

This fun reflective activity helps us understand change in complex systems – and might open the door to new thinking, as a group considers the patterns, assumptions, and lessons that emerged in shared leadership. (No juggling skills required.)

Experiential Aim:

Participants will experience collaborative work with real-world constraints and explore how problem solving works -- and doesn't-- when the context gets complicated.

Facilitator Prep:

Review workshop and bring necessary materials.

Related Content:

Another Civic Agency workshop that pairs well with this one is "Reflective Listening" in the "Us" theme.

Materials:

A ball, stuffed animal, cushion toy, or any number of other irregular objects. Anywhere from 3-7 items works best. Optional toy body parts may be used in the closing activity.

Procedure

INTRODUCTIONS (5 MIN)

Presenters introduce themselves to the full group, participants introduce themselves to a neighbor.

GROUP JUGGLING ACTIVITY (25 MIN)

Part 1

- Have people form a circle, standing, if possible.
- Point out that this simulation is about what happens to leaders.
- Ask them to designate a leader.
- Have the leader begin by throwing a ball to another person in the circle, who will then throw it to another, and so on until "everyone has had the ball once and only once."
- Tell people, "you are establishing an order, so remember from whom you got the ball and to whom you threw it."
- Then begin again, giving the ball to the leader and having him throw it to the next person.
- Once the ball has begun, add another, then another, then another. (It's helpful if you don't just use balls, but also stuffed animals, cushion toys, or other irregular objects.)
- Chaos will ensue, with laughter, as items fall on the floor, people get confused. Stop the exercise and ask people what they noticed (e.g., how they felt when they dropped a ball, how others responded to someone dropping a ball) and what they learned (e.g. that too many balls in the air can be a problem, some people are more skilled than others, things don't always work out as planned, etc.).

Part 2

- Have the group select their two favorite balls or animals/objects to throw. Tell the group that next, maintaining the same order, they'll have one ball/animal go around forward and the other backward. (You can give the group a chance to practice the backward round once before they do both at once.)
- Then have them do both again at the same time, and time them.

GROUP ACTIVITY CONT'D

- At the end of the round, announce their time (e.g. 34 seconds). Ask them—using this neutral language —“how fast do you think you can do this?” (some will say 36 seconds, others will say 30). Give them a chance to do it again. Then (no matter what their time) say, “I have seen other groups do it in 5 seconds. Can you do that?” Then step away for a few minutes and let them begin to work together to meet the challenge.
- If necessary, you can remind them that they just have to touch the animals in the order that was established. Allow them to experiment and keep timing them. (Usually they will get significantly faster, but they may not get to 5 seconds.)

Solution: The group reorders itself so that people stand in a circle that is based on the order established. The “leader” stands in the middle and spins around touching the animal against the outstretched hands of his colleagues.

DEBRIEF (20 MIN)

Possible questions:

- What did you do to make things work well?
- Where did good ideas come from?
- What did the designated leader contribute?
- How did you choose the leader?
- How did you feel when we said another group did this in 5 seconds?
- How did you respond to failure?
- How did you adapt?
- What prompted your group energy to change, in what ways?
- What did you hear in the instructions vs. what did you assume were constraints?
- What does this have to do with leadership?

The solution is possible because of the creativity and flexibility of the group. The answer doesn't come from the leader. In fact, you never know where it will come from, so as a leader, be open, listen, encourage people

to offer ideas, and don't “punish” people for ideas that don't work. Help people keep their eye on the ball and offer what they can.

Record the lessons that participants offer. These might include:

1. Keep your eye on the ball (on purpose).
2. Good ideas on how to solve problems may come from where you least expect them - and not always from the person in charge. (In fact most real change comes from the fringes.)
3. Sometimes we don't hear people who are offering solutions.
4. Other people can drop the ball.
5. You can improve if you practice.
6. People in a system are affected by others in systems.
7. You don't have control over many of the things that affect you.
8. You can make only so much improvement in any system. If you need more, you may need to create a new system. (It's one thing to be at 36 seconds and have to go to 33; then practice or minor modifications will work. But if you have to go from 36 second to 5, you won't get there through practice; you need a new system.)
9. Think about rules/paradigms and assumptions that govern the way we approach a problem.
10. Don't confuse habits with rules.

CLOSING (5 MIN)

Do a quick “body parts debrief,” in which participants get an assigned a body part (or a toy body part, if you have them - consider this set from Training Wheels: <https://www.trainingwheelsgear.com/products/body-part-deluxe>) and share brief comments on the session:

- Heart: A feeling you experienced
- Brain: Something you learned
- Ear: Something you heard or didn't hear
- Stomach: Something that took guts
- Hand: An action you want to take
- Eye: A vision that you have for the future
- Smiley Face: Something that made you hopeful

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Workshop Survey

Thank you for taking time to attend this Civic Agency workshop. We are very interested in receiving your feedback.
If you have participants complete evaluations on paper, please scan them and send them to team@seed-coalition.org

My primary role: (Circle one or more.)

Student Faculty Staff Administrator Community Organization Staff AmeriCorps/VISTA
Other:

My Institution or Organization:

Workshop Title/Topic:

Date of Workshop:

Please indicate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following about your experience with the workshop you participated in:

I felt welcomed and included.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I learned about one or more leadership tools or resources.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The tools and exercises I learned about are valuable.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel capable of using the tools and exercises I learned about.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I intend to use at least one thing I learned here.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Other participants in the workshop helped me see things from a different perspective.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I developed new or deeper connections with others.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

What else would you like us to know about your experience with this workshop?