

Forming & Exploring Teams – Teaching Notes

STAR Leadership Program

Objectives:

Learners will be able to:

1. Identify key components of successful and unsuccessful teams.
2. Discuss their behavior and work style in a team environment.
3. Develop a plan for forming a work team.

Procedure:

Prior to the lesson, obtain several small (50-100 piece) puzzles. The puzzles should be different pictures, but preferably of the same type. For example, puzzles of different kinds of cars or stuffed animals. If possible, try to find puzzles with similar colors, too. These are usually available at K-Mart, Target, Walmart, etc. for a few dollars. You will need enough puzzles for students to work together in teams of 2-5 people. Try to have at least 3 different puzzles if possible.

Prior to class, dump the puzzles out of their boxes into piles next to their boxes. Take pieces from each puzzle and mix them in with pieces from the other puzzles. You will want each box to have the majority of its own pieces, but it should also include several pieces from each of the other boxes.

For two of the puzzles, switch boxes so that teams will have most of the pieces of one puzzle, but the box of another. For one of the puzzles, put the pieces into an envelope or plastic bag. Hold onto the box, which you will keep hidden during the activity (as discussed below).

PART ONE: The Puzzle Activity

1. Prior to the start of the class, write on the whiteboard or a piece of flip chart paper the following phrase—EXACTLY AS IT IS WRITTEN:
 - i. GOAL: To put the puzzles together as quickly as possible.
2. When students come into the class, explain that they are going to be working in teams to complete a project. Divide students into teams. You may have them count off or use some other random method of combining into teams.
3. Distribute a puzzle to each team. For the team that has the puzzle in the envelope or plastic bag, do not say anything about you having the missing box. Keep it hidden for now and don't mention it.
4. Point to the goal that you've written on the board and read it out loud. Ask if there are any questions. There usually aren't—in fact, some teams will probably already be working. If there are questions, go ahead and answer them. Once all questions have been answered, have the teams start working.
5. As the teams begin to work, simply walk around the room observing what they are doing. If a team is making progress, you may compliment them on that —“The team with the cat puzzle has several edges put together. Great job.” If a team is not doing so well, comment on that as well—“Oops, looks like the team with the bear is having some problems.”

6. As you observe, note how the teams begin their work and what they say to each other. Write down your observations as you walk around the room. Notice who emerges as a leader of the team, how the teams organize their work, who participates and who doesn't, how they talk to each other, etc.
7. Within about 5 minutes of working, someone will realize that there's a problem with the puzzles—usually they'll realize that they have pieces that don't belong or that their pieces don't seem to match the box that they're working with. They may also notice that they are missing pieces. When this happens, they will usually start murmuring about it within the team. Note when this happens and what the team says and does.
8. Initially, only one team will probably realize that there's a problem. A few things can occur at this point. Try to take note of what they do.
 - a. The teams may ask you if all of the pieces are there. You should reply that everyone has everything they need to get the job done.
 - b. An individual will take extra pieces from their puzzle and try to exchange them for "extra" pieces from another team's puzzle.
 - c. A team member will go to another puzzle and just try to take pieces that they think belongs to their puzzle. If this happens, pay particular attention to how the other team responds.
 - d. Someone from the team that has realized the problem will make a general announcement to all teams about what they've realized and try to get the other teams to share pieces. Sometimes the other teams will believe this and go along. Other times they will think it's a "trick" and will blow it off.
9. Eventually, the teams will realize that they need to get pieces from the other puzzles to complete their puzzle. The teams with switched boxes may realize that the boxes are switched they will either change the boxes back or they may switch puzzles to match their box. The team with no box may either complain within their team that they don't have a box, or they may ask you for the box. If they ask, you can give it to them. If they complain in their team you can either ignore it or you can get the box and offer it to them.
10. As the teams get closer to finishing, make more comments about their progress—"Oh, looks like the team with the cat puzzle is almost finished—they only need a few more pieces," or "The bear team is still struggling. Looks like they're in last place." The idea here is to state objective facts about progress, not to necessarily make any "qualitative judgments. Usually when you do this, the teams will feel more "pressure" and will get more frantic in their work. They may complain about your comments if they're on a slower team or they may say something competitive to the other teams if they are moving faster.
11. Continue to observe and record team behavior as they approach the finish line. For example, if one team is moving ahead of everyone else, the other teams will often make comments. In some cases, they may even hide pieces so that the team can't finish their puzzle!

12. When the first team finishes their puzzle, they will generally shout out something like “Done!” or “We’ve won.” The other teams will groan and moan. Some will stop working, while others will continue to work. The team that has “won” will generally sit back and gloat, congratulating each other. Get the attention of the group and point out to them the goal of the activity—to put the puzzles (plural) together as quickly as possible. This means ALL of the puzzles, not just one puzzle. At this point, the teams will then start working together more cooperatively with the team that “won” spreading out to help the other teams. Let this continue for another minute or two and then end the activity for the debrief. (For people who MUST have their puzzles together, tell them that they can continue to work quietly while you all discuss what happened.)

PART TWO: Puzzle Activity DEBRIEF

1. Ask participants how they are feeling. Typical responses include:
 - a. Frustrated
 - b. Annoyed
 - c. Anxious
 - d. Competitive
 - e. “Tricked”
 - f. Happy (usually the winning team)
 - g. Confused
2. Ask them what happened. Record their answers on the white board.
3. Ask them why they think these things happened. Generally they will start by blaming you, the facilitator. Typical responses include:
 - a. You messed up the puzzles and didn’t tell us.
 - b. You didn’t give us everything we needed.
 - c. You didn’t give us good instructions.
 - d. You were saying good things about one team and bad things about another.
1. They may also point out “bad” behavior from other teams:
 - e. They hid our pieces
 - f. They wouldn’t share
 - g. They were saying mean things.
4. Explain that this activity gave them a chance to see how teams really work and how they behave in a team environment. Tell students that you are going to talk in detail about what happened both within their individual puzzle team as well as between the teams.

Key Discussion Points.

Please ask questions and give examples of what people said and did to support these points. The idea is to have the teams think about their experience and then to tell you, the facilitator, what happened and the connections.

WITHIN THE TEAMS—Key Questions

- What tasks did people do?
- How did they decide who would do what?
- Did everyone participate? Why or why not?
- How did they communicate within their team?
- Was there someone who kept them focused on the task? How did they do this?

- Was there someone who seemed in charge of “morale”? How did they do that?
- How did they think their team worked together? What worked well? What would they have done differently?
- Why did the team that “won” finish first?
- What would have happened if the facilitator gave the teams a time limit—that the task had to be completed in 10 minutes. Would that have changed how they worked? How?

WITHIN THE TEAMS—Discussion Points

- People tended to pick tasks based on what they enjoyed and/or were good at.
- If they felt like there wasn’t a role for them, they tended to sit back and do little.
- Usually they feel that their communication within their team was good because it was a small group and they could easily talk to one another.
- Sometimes a leader emerges because that person has more experience (is good at puzzles) or they have more of a “take-charge” kind of attitude.
- If there was a “take-charge” leader, discuss if people did or didn’t like that approach.
- If a team didn’t have someone who was good at putting together puzzles, they didn’t tend to do as well. (Usually the winning team has a “puzzle expert”)

BETWEEN THE TEAMS—Key Questions

- Why did you think this was a competition?
- Because you thought this was a competition how did you behave differently than if you had realized that this was supposed to be a cooperative project?
- How did the teams interact with each other? What did they do well? What didn’t they do well? How did they help each other? How did they get in each other’s way?
- How did the teams interact with the facilitator?
- Did you ask questions? Why or why not?
- What did you think of the facilitator’s responses to your questions?
- What did you think of the facilitator’s comments about each team’s progress? Were these helpful? Why or why not?
- If you had understood that the goal was cooperative—everyone had to put all the puzzles together as quickly as possible—would you have organized the work differently? How could you have organized it?
- What could the facilitator have done to make the work go more smoothly?
- What could the teams have done differently to make the work go more smoothly?

BETWEEN THE TEAMS—Key Discussion Points

- • What the teams experienced is similar to what happens at work, where different departments will forget that they’re supposed to be working together and they will start to act in competition with one another.
- • The facilitator was like a work supervisor.
- • The teams usually did not communicate effectively with the facilitator. They didn’t ask questions to clarify the goal and because they didn’t the facilitator would assume they understood what was going on. They just started working immediately. If they’d taken the time to think about the job and to ask questions, things might have gone more smoothly.

- Teams often think this is a competition because the facilitator comments on the progress each team makes. They assume that this is the facilitator's way of telling the other teams that they are "failing," etc. The facilitator could be more helpful if he/she gave useful feedback. Rather than commenting on progress, it would be better for the facilitator to go to a team and say "What can I do to help?" Or to say "I notice that you don't have the right box for your puzzle. Let's see who has your box."
- The teams expected the facilitator to organize everything perfectly and to tell them everything they needed to know. They didn't expect that they should have to ask questions, etc.—it was the facilitator's responsibility to ensure that they knew what to do and could get it done. Often they are frustrated and angry about this, although it is completely unrealistic to have this expectation, especially in a work environment. Many times a supervisor doesn't realize there's a problem unless the workers talk with him/her about it and what they're finding out. Sometimes the supervisor knows only as much as the workers know—someone else gave the supervisor the wrong information.
- In a team situation, EVERYONE has a responsibility to communicate, particularly to ask questions, give feedback, etc.
- Because the teams didn't understand the goal, they didn't organize their work as effectively as they could have. If they had known, they would probably have moved so that all tables and teams were sitting together and could work on the puzzles more efficiently. They would have shared pieces more freely and wouldn't have done anything to hinder anyone's progress.

SUMMARY DISCUSSION:

- Ask students to write down what they think are the main things that need to happen for a team to be successful. Also have them identify the things that get in the way of a team working well together. Answers should include:

Successful teams need:

- Good communication—TWO-WAY communication, ask questions, provide feedback, understand instructions.
- Thorough understanding of their job and the tools they have to get the job done.
- The right people with the skills to get the job done, and in the right mix (for example, in this activity if they have no one who can do a puzzle and everyone wants to run around exchanging pieces, they won't get it done quickly).
- The right work environment
- A plan for doing the work and timelines.
- The right tools for the work
- Helpful feedback from a supervisor—not just commenting on what is being done, but finding out if there are questions, pointing people to the right information, tools, etc.

Barriers to Successful Teams

- Poor communication within the team, between teams.
- Competitive behavior
- Poor instructions.
- Not asking questions.

- Not having a plan or the right people or tools.
- Not organizing the work well.
- People not doing their jobs.

Transfer of Learning—Have each person identify at least two things they will do differently in their work environment as a result of participating in this exercise. These should be concrete, measurable activities, not just “I’ll be more understanding” or “I’ll be less competitive.”