

111 Lookers and Runners

Purpose/Objectives:

Communication in an organization is a complex and multi-dimensional process. This dynamic exercise dramatically demonstrates these complexities in only a few minutes. Participants experience (and can later discuss) dimensions such as message clarity, time pressure, assumptions, emotional involvement, and organizational structure. Each of two or more teams tries to be the first to correctly assemble a duplicate of a given device. But the builders of each team cannot see the model. They depend on other members of the team to quickly and accurately relay instructions to them. During the discussion, participants are eager to probe the many facets of communication they experienced and to develop practical, job-related solutions.

Type: Simulation

Time Required: 60 to 90 minutes

Group Size: 12 to 30, 10 minimum

Some ways to use this Session Builder include:

- A warm-up exercise to build group cohesiveness, surface key issues, and prepare for specific skill building.
- An assessment of communication skills and team-oriented behavior.
- An application exercise to practice communication and team-oriented skills in a multi-dimensional situation.

Preparation:

- Using an assortment of 15 to 20 Lego blocks or Tinker Toys, assemble a device such as one of those shown in Figure 1. This is the model the teams will attempt to duplicate. The model should be reasonably complex, but it's more interesting if it has some recognizable shape. Since participants may not handle or disassemble this model, be sure the size and shape of all parts are not totally obscured.
- Prepare a kit of parts for each team. Be sure each kit includes at least the correct parts to build the model. It's best if all kits are identical (or at least include the same number of parts). Put the parts for each team in a large envelope or small paper bag. This makes it easier to hand them out during the exercise.
- Make a copy of the instructions for each participant. (Or, prepare just one copy per team—see Options/Variations.)

- Collect large cardboard boxes to serve as screens. You'll need one for each team plus one for the device already built. These can be used as is, or they can be cut or taped to form three-sided screens as shown in Figure 2.
- This exercise works best in a large, square room with furniture that can be easily rearranged. You will need two tables for each team (one for team meetings and one for construction). You will also need a table at the front of the room for the device already built. (See Figure 3.)
- Have a flip chart/markers or chalkboard/chalk available to record key points during the discussion.
- Provide paper and pencils for participants to use after the construction is completed.

Process:

- To prepare the group, read or paraphrase the following:

Communication is a complex process. It involves not only messages but also time pressures, assumptions, and organizational structure. In a moment, I'm going to divide you into teams to participate in an exercise that will demonstrate what happens in an organization when all these forces are at work at the same time. Behind the screen at the front of the room, I have assembled a model of the simulation device. Your objective, as a team, is to assemble a device exactly like it as quickly as possible. The first team to do so is the winner.

I will give each team a set of parts to work with and a sheet describing the rules of the exercise. Each of you will have one of 6 jobs on the team: Looker; Runner, Builder, Supplier; Feed backer; or Manager (If you have only 5 on a team, Managers may act as Suppliers.) You will then have 10 minutes to decide who will take each job and plan your strategy for the exercise. Following your planning period, I will take a moment to answer any questions you may have; then the exercise will begin. Please do not look at the device behind the screen until then.

- Divide the group into roughly equal teams of at least 5 participants each. For teams of 6, one person should take each job, although you may permit the Manager to act as Supplier in order that a team might have 2 Runners. For teams of 7 to 10 participants, suggest that there must be at least one person in each job, plus 1 additional person in any of the following jobs: Runners, Feedbackers, Lookers, and Builders
- Ask participants to move to the table designated for their team, and distribute the instructions and supplies. Remind participants that they have just 10 minutes for their planning period and that no construction may take place during the planning time.

- After about 5 minutes, verify with each team that jobs have been assigned. Numerous questions may arise. You may respond to them now or wait until the end of the 10-minute planning period.
- When responding to questions, try to appear as helpful as possible without actually offering suggestions. Most of the questions will relate to two primary issues: floor layout and interpretation of the rules.

You may point out that the device already built is behind the screen in front of the room. When the exercise begins, Lookers from all teams should position themselves behind this screen where they can see the device. Runners are not permitted behind the screen. (Avoid hinting that any other team member may go behind the screen. Most will assume they cannot.) Each team has a work space and screen along the side of the room opposite the constructed device. Builders should position themselves at this “construction site” behind the screen. The “parts supply location” should be at the table where each team is now. Team meetings are to be held around the table.

- To minimize questions about rules, review some of the key ones.
 - Runners may not look at either the device already built or the device their team is building.
 - Builders may not have more than two parts unattached at any one time.
 - Outside of team meetings, Feed backers are restricted to their two messages.
 - A Manager may call a team meeting at any time. Everyone on the team must attend. Outside of meetings, Managers may talk only to the Feed backers who may use only their two messages.
 - Tell the Managers to signal you whenever they think their team has finished. Tell the group you will stop the exercise and check their construction. If the device is not constructed correctly, the team stopping the exercise automatically loses. And, either the other team wins (if there are only two teams) or the exercise continues until another team thinks it is ready.
 - If further questions arise about the rules, try to avoid specific responses that indicate what participants may do. Simply quote directly from the instructions or say something like, “Anything not specifically prohibited is allowed.” You may even have to gently cut off questions to avoid giving too many hints.
- Tell participants they may begin construction; then step back and watch the fun. This is a very lively exercise with numerous opportunities for process observation. You may wish to carry a pad and pencil to make some notes. It usually takes only about 20 minutes for the first team to complete construction and signal you to call time. Compare the devices carefully. Competition is keen. Other teams will be nearly finished too, and a mistake here is likely to be embarrassing. You may even have to take the team’s device up front to compare it with the constructed model. If it is accurate, declare that they’re the winning team. If not, the other team wins or the exercise continues.

- Your other role during the exercise is that of “enforcer.” Occasionally check to see that there are no Runners behind the screen, that Feedbackers are using only their two messages, and that Builders have no more than two parts not attached to the device. (Note that anyone except Lookers and Runners may use diagrams, sketches, or drawings.) Of course, the rules do not define any penalties. Participants usually assume many more restrictions than actually exist; therefore, a gentle reminder to violators is normally all that is required.
- While it is extremely rare, a team may challenge the lack of penalties with which to enforce the rules. If so, you may wish to introduce the issue of fairness by telling the challenging team that this point is likely *to* come up during the discussion period which follows. Then, note what action they take and what happens as a result.
- As soon as a “winner” has been declared, ask the Builders to remove the screens so that all can see how close the remaining teams have come. Ask the Suppliers to collect all parts, and ask the entire group to reconvene for discussion.

Discussion:

- Because of the many issues this exercise can raise, it’s best to begin the discussion by asking each participant to prepare some notes individually. If you’ve not already done so, give each participant paper and pencil. Then ask them to jot down whatever is on their minds at the moment. Suggest that they work fast—capturing as many thoughts as possible. After about 2 or 3 minutes, help focus their thinking and jog their memory using some or all of the following issues:
 - Interpretation of the rules
 - Assumptions about what one could or couldn’t do
 - Choice of words to describe parts or positions
 - Information lost through the links of the communication chain
 - Feelings of time pressure and competition
 - Feelings of frustration or elation
 - The role and responsibility of the Manager
 - The value of team meetings, if any
 - Clarity of and commitment to objectives
 - Individual versus group objectives
- After about 2 or 3 minutes, ask for a volunteer to begin the discussion with an observation from his or her notes. Use active listening to fully draw the participants out. Then, ask if any others had similar thoughts. Try to keep the discussion centered on this one topic or issue. Before moving on to another participant and another issue, ask someone in the group to briefly summarize. Post this summary on the flip chart or chalkboard.
- Participants may find it difficult to relate the exercise to actual job situations. From time to time during the discussion of each issue, inject questions like, **“Can you think of any similar circumstances on the job?”** Or, **“How does this relate to a real-life situation?”**

- Those in the job of Manager rarely take full advantage of the flexibility and authority of their position. They can, in fact, build the device themselves quickly and easily. Instead, they almost always cast themselves in the role of supervising the work of others. This provides an interesting point for discussion; but use care to avoid undue embarrassment.

When this point comes out, ask participants to speculate how they would have felt if the Manager had stepped in and “taken over.” Or, if the Manager actually did “take over,” try to draw out the feelings of other team members. Some will be glad because it helped the team. Others will feel “hurt” or “useless.”

- Suppliers usually make similar assumptions. They sit quietly even though there are no restrictions on their movement or communication.
- When several issues have been posted on the chart or when only 5 minutes remain of the available time, ask each participant to review the list and make a statement about one thing he or she is going to start doing, stop doing, or do differently back on the job.

Options/Variations:

- A number of interesting options are available for this exercise. They generally relate either to the role of Manager or the quantity of supplies available.
- Instead of giving a copy of the instructions to all participants, form the group into teams; and instruct each team to select one of their members to be the Manager. Tell the group that as soon as the Managers are selected, they are to report to you for supplies and instructions. When all managers are present, issue one copy of the instructions to each along with a kit of supplies. Each Manager should take a few minutes to read the instructions, then return to his or her team to pass the instructions along to the “employees.”
- Instead of a general-questions period, ask the “Managers” to report to you for a managers’ meeting. Use this meeting to answer any questions they may have, following the guidelines in the Process section. You may even choose to show the Managers the device at this time.
- Instead of an envelope or bag containing a number of extra parts beyond those needed to complete the device, include just one more than those required. This “odd part” will serve as a measure of their confidence in their own abilities and will stimulate additional discussion. Be aware that it may also dilute the focus of the exercise.

Notes:

- A device of 15 to 20 parts seems to work best. If fewer than 15 are used, the exercise and discussion may be significantly diminished. More than 20 or so parts prolongs the exercise unnecessarily, and frustration may override the competitive spirit.
- If you have 3 or more teams, it is difficult to enforce the rules because you can't remember who has been assigned what position. You may wish to prepare some stick-on name badges with a team number and a large letter L, R, B, etc., designating the position. Issue the badges during the initial team meeting after positions have been assigned.
- While this exercise requires more preparation than most of the others in the Session Builders collection, the dramatic results are well worth the effort.

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