

Exercises for Building Communication Skills

Use the exercises below to improve essential communication skills like listening, empathy and verbalization. Some of these will also strengthen team members' problem-solving, creative-thinking and leadership skills.

Exercise 1: The Blindfold Game

In this activity, blindfolded participants must rely on their partners to navigate an "obstacle course" within a room.

Uses

This activity builds both communication and listening skills. It also increases trust between partners.

People and Materials

- Two or more people.
- Enough blindfolds for half of the participants.
- A private room. Larger rooms, such as a conference room, work best for this activity.
- Furniture and other items that you can use as obstacles.

Time Flexible, typically 15-20 minutes.

Instructions

1. Arrange the room by scattering furniture and other obstacles around it. Navigating your way around it should be fairly challenging, but safe.
2. Divide team members into pairs and ask them to stand at one end of the room.
3. One person from each pair should put on the blindfold.
4. People then guide their blindfolded partners across the room, issuing instructions so that they don't bump into anything. They are not allowed to touch one another.
5. When a pair reaches the other side of the room, they switch roles and repeat the process back across the obstacle course.

Follow-Up

Talk with your team members about their experience of this exercise. Consider these questions:

- How did they have to communicate differently to guide their partners?
- When they were blindfolded, how did they change and adapt how they listened?

Exercise 2: Card Pieces

In this activity, team members trade pieces of playing cards to put together complete cards.

Uses

This exercise is useful for showing team members others' perspectives. It builds communication and negotiation skills and helps people develop empathy.

People and Materials

- Enough people for at least three teams of two.
- Playing cards - use between four and six for each person.
- A private room.

Time: 15 minutes.

Instructions

1. Cut each playing card into half diagonally, then in half diagonally again, so you have four triangular pieces for each card.
2. Mix all the pieces together and put equal numbers of cards into as many envelopes as you have teams.
3. Divide people up into teams of three or four. You need at least three teams. If you're short of people, teams of two will work just as well.
4. Give each team an envelope of playing card pieces.
5. Each team has three minutes to sort its pieces, determine which ones it needs to make complete cards, and develop a bargaining strategy.
6. After three minutes, allow the teams to start bartering for pieces. People can barter on their own or collectively with their team. Give the teams eight minutes to barter.
7. When the time is up, count each team's completed cards. Whichever team has the most wins the round.

Follow-Up

After the activity, ask your team members to think about the strategies they used. Consider these questions:

- Which negotiation strategies worked? Which didn't?
- What could they have done better?
- What other skills, such as active listening or empathy, did they need to use?

Exercise 3: Make a Team With...

In this activity, team members must act quickly to form small teams based on instructions that you shout out.

Uses

This activity strengthens communication skills. It also teaches team members how to think on their feet.

People and Materials

- Any number of team members.
- A private room.

Time: 15 minutes.

Instructions

1. Explain to participants that they will have to form a team based on the instructions that you shout out. For example, some instructions could include "Get into a team with people who have the same number of children as you" or "Get into a team with people who like similar types of music to you."
2. Shout out instructions. People can shout out or sit down to signal that their team is "complete." Encourage people to work as quickly as possible. Repeat the exercise as many times as you want.

Follow-Up

Talk with your team about how this activity encouraged them to communicate. How could they learn to open up and communicate more effectively in work situations in the future?

Exercise 4: Just Listen

This is an activity that encourages participants to communicate how they feel about a subject. People get into pairs and one member talks about her opinions. Her partner listens without speaking, and then, without rebuttal, recaps on what has been said.

Uses

This activity strengthens your team members' listening skills. Listening is an incredibly important part of good communication, and it's a skill that people often ignore in team activities. This activity also shows team members how to listen with an open mind.

People and Materials

- An even number of team members, ideally.
- Eight index cards for each team of two. Each card should list one topic.
- A private room.

Time: 25-30 minutes.

Instructions

1. Have your team members sit down in pairs.
2. Give each team eight index cards.
3. One partner will blindly choose a card and then speak for three minutes on how he feels about the topic. As he talks, the other person cannot speak - her goal is to listen.
4. After three minutes, the listener has one minute to recap on what her partner has said. She cannot debate, agree or disagree - only summarize.
5. Next, the roles switch, and the process starts again.

Follow-Up

Talk with your team members about how they felt about this exercise. Consider these questions:

- How did speakers feel about their partners' ability to listen with an open mind? Did their partners' body language communicate how they felt about what was being said?
- How did listeners feel about not being able to speak about their own views on the topic? How well were they able to keep an open mind? How well did they listen?
- How well did the listening partners summarize the speakers' opinions? Did they get better as the exercise progressed?
- How can they use the lessons from this exercise at work?

Exercise 5: Build a Bridge

In this activity, two teams must work together to build a bridge using materials that you supply. They each build half of the bridge and then "connect" the two pieces to make a complete one, made up of two similar designs. The activity is challenging because the room is divided: no team is able to see how the other constructs its bridge. Teams have to communicate verbally through a sheet or tarpaulin that divides the room, as they work.

Uses

The Build a Bridge activity strengthens communication skills because each team has to discuss ideas and brainstorm ways to use their materials to build half a bridge. In addition, this activity improves group problem solving and creative thinking. You can also use it to develop people's leadership skills if you decide to elect a team leader for each group, or if people naturally take the lead.

People and Materials

- Enough people for at least two teams of three. If you have a larger group, you can create several teams - just make sure that you have an even number and enough space and tarpaulin to give each team a secluded area to work in.
- Materials for bridge building. This could include toy bricks, pieces of wood, tape, glue, pipes, canvas, paper, or straws.
- Notepads and pencils for drawing.
- Tape measures.
- Tarpaulins or sheets to section off the room, giving each team a private area to build its bridge in.

Time: 45 minutes to one hour.

Instructions

1. Before participants arrive, arrange the tarpaulins or sheets throughout the room so that teams won't be able to see one another's work.
2. Divide participants into two (or four or six) teams. Team size doesn't matter; however, teams of four or fewer might be most effective.
3. Give each group a bag of materials. Each bag should contain the same number and type of materials. Each team should also get a notepad and pencils, and a tape measure.
4. Give everyone 10 minutes to draw their ideas. Remind teams to communicate with their "partner group" on the other side of the tarpaulin to make sure that they come up with similar designs. Remember, each half of the bridge must be able to "join" at the end of the building phase.
5. Each team then gets up to 40 minutes to construct its half of the bridge. While the teams build, walk around to ensure that each team communicates with the other through the tarpaulin.
6. When time is up, remove the tarpaulin to see how close each group came to matching their partner team's bridge.

Follow-Up

- When you finish the activity, use the questions below to start a discussion:
- What was most challenging about this activity?
- Who was responsible for communicating instructions between teams? If a number of people issued instructions through the tarpaulin, would it have been easier to appoint just one person on each team to do this job?
- Were there any miscommunications? If so, what happened?
- If a team appointed a leader, how well did this person lead the group? What were the leader's strengths and weaknesses?

Key Points

No matter how well your team communicates, using group activities to strengthen existing skills can be an enjoyable way of developing good working relationships. They're especially useful for building relationships and improving communication in new teams, and for solving communication issues within existing teams.

Some of these team activities can also help people develop problem-solving, creativity and leadership skills.