

The Marshmallow Challenge



PURPOSE OR GOAL OF ACTIVITY:

Build the tallest free-standing structure with the given materials.

TIME NEEDED:

This activity takes 20 minutes for instructions and team challenge, followed by 15-20 minute debrief.

GROUP SIZE:

2-8 individuals per group

FACILITATOR MATERIALS NEEDED

- Dry erase board or note pad on easel and markers
- Paper bag or envelope that includes materials for each group

MATERIALS NEEDED FOR EACH GROUP OF 4

In advance of the activity, create a packet of materials for each team, with each packet containing 20 sticks of dry/uncooked regular spaghetti, roll of masking tape, one yard of string or yarn, one marshmallow. Ingredients should be placed into a paper lunch bag or envelope and placed on tables.

- Use string or yarn that can be easily broken by hand, or if not, include a scissors in the packet.
- Use a name brand marshmallow that measures the 'standard' size, approximately 1 ½ inches. Avoid stale marshmallows, use a squishy marshmallow that gives the impression of being very light.
- Standard size lunch bags work well, as do letter size manilla envelopes.

Additional tools needed by the facilitator:

- Measuring tape to measure the height of the structures.
- Stopwatch or digital timer to track eighteen minutes.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR DAY OF THE MEETING

1. Place the packet of materials on each table in advance.
2. Introduce the exercise: To complete this activity you will need to divide into groups of 2-8 individuals.
3. Explain what is going to take place during the activity, as follows:
 - **Do not begin until instructed to do so.**
 - On each table there is a packet of materials which includes 20 sticks of dry spaghetti, masking tape, string, and 1 regular size marshmallow. You will be given 18 minutes to build the tallest, free-standing structure using only the materials supplied. The winning group is the team whose free-standing structure is the tallest.
 - **Here are the rules for this activity:**
 - The team that has the tallest structure measured from the table top surface to the top of the marshmallow is the winner.
 - The structure cannot be suspended from a higher structure, like a chair, ceiling or chandelier.
 - The entire marshmallow must be on top of the structure. Cutting or eating part of the marshmallow disqualifies the team.
 - The team can use as much of the materials in the bag/envelope as desired. The bag/envelope cannot be used as part of the structure.
 - Teams are free to break the spaghetti, as well as cut up the tape and string/yarn to create new structures.
 - Teams cannot hold on to the structure when the time runs out or they will be disqualified.

- **Answer any questions the teams may have.**
- **Start the activity and start the countdown clock.**
 - Keep watch on the teams to ensure they are following the rules of the game. Remind them that the marshmallow **must** be on the top of the structure, and that the structure must be free-standing.
 - Periodically provide attendees a reminder of the time remaining, and announce ‘Stop’ when the time is up. Look around to see which team built the tallest and safest free-standing tower with the whole marshmallow intact on top. (Many groups tend to wait until the last minute to put their marshmallow on top and the weight of the marshmallow will topple their spaghetti tower).
- **Congratulate and celebrate the winning team!**

Discussion

Facilitate a debriefing session with the whole group.

Start by asking the following questions:

1. Did a team leader emerge? Someone who organized the team, shared a plan or vision, assigned tasks and responsibilities? Was workload distributed among all?
2. (Ask the Winning team) how did you figure out what strategy to use?
3. Was communication clear?
4. Did anyone on your team stop participating or become observers only? What could you have done to keep all members of the group fully engaged?
5. How does this relate to teamwork?
6. What does the marshmallow represent here?

The following points should be made by the facilitator:

- Normally most groups begin by orienting themselves to the task. They talk about what the finished structure might look like and who should do what. In TeamSTEPPS this is referred to as a brief. We will talk more about briefs and other communication techniques throughout this session.
- Sometimes team members tune out or stop trying to help achieve the goals of the activity. It may be out of frustration either with the others on the team, or the process, or for some other reason. Working to understand can help to keep them engaged.
- The more collaborative a team is, the more they can overcome challenges in the workplace.
- The marshmallow can represent a number of things:
 - If you imagine that the marshmallow represents a nursing home resident, this activity reinforces that it is important to make sure we involve residents as part of the planning process, include them in decision making and not wait until the end to figure out if the proposed solution will work out for the resident or not. It is important to keep the outcome in mind - at the very least the resident’s needs/safety must be kept in mind during the entire process to drive the team to seek the best solution.
 - Resident- or person-centered care in the nursing home describes a philosophy that puts the needs, interests, and choices of residents at the center of care. It provides residents with the ability to exercise control and autonomy over their own lives to the fullest extent possible. Evidence shows that giving residents a greater role in their care can improve their health.
 - The marshmallow can also symbolize our assumptions, so we should make sure to check and challenge our assumptions by speaking up, communicating our perspectives, clarifying that others understanding is the same thing, and listen to others’ perspectives so the entire team can have a shared mental model.

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Adapted from activity during 2016 TeamSTEPPS session “Using Games to Teach Teamwork and Communication”) as presented by Yue Ming Huang, EdD, MHS; Ken Miller, RN, MSN, CCRN; Randolph Steadman, MD, MS; Jennifer Zanotti, RN, MS, ACNP-BC, CEN.

This activity was popularized by Tom Wujec with his TED Talk “Build a Tower, Build a Team”: http://www.ted.com/talks/tom_wujec_build_a_tower.

Tom’s design website <http://www.tomwujec.com/design-projects/marshmallow-challenge/> also includes downloadable PDF instructions: <http://marshmallowchallenge.com/Instructions.html>

The original activity is credited to Peter Stillman: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1p5sBzMtB3Q>.

Here’s an 18 minute countdown timer with music you can use:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQKcrVDujVs>

