



**OBTC 2017 at Providence College
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The Tennis Ball Exercise

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1) Title, Abstract & Keywords

TITLE: "The Tennis Ball Exercise"

ABSTRACT: The day student teams are formed, this tennis ball tossing exercise is used to help them understand how to communicate effectively in teams and facilitate team building. The exercise's initial stage, of three, has few instructions about how to toss the ball. Participants enjoy this stage, however effectiveness and productivity are limited. More specific instructions are given in the two subsequent stages. Productivity increases, while fun decreases. Debriefing focuses on how throwing a tennis ball is analogous to communicating and how communication can improve team building. Discussion then focuses on how design tasks so they are both productive and enjoyable.

KEYWORDS: Communication, Team Building, Productivity

2) Teaching Implications:

What is the contribution of your session to management pedagogy/andragogy? Specifically, please include your learning objectives, and describe what management and/or teaching topics are relevant to your session, and why. Also, include theoretical, disciplinary, or theoretical foundations that will help reviewers understand how your ideas fit within the broader field of management.

The major contribution of this session is demonstrate an exercise that enables students to understand that communication and team building, in any organization, requires all parties to:

- design and use productive processes,
- pay attention to what the other party is doing,
- clearly signal or state their own intent before acting, and
- conduct their communication and coordination in a fashion that is "quick, but not in a hurry" (Wooden).

In addition to the classroom objectives at the time it is used, the exercise can also be referred back to when introducing job design and discussing the motivational properties of tasks, thereby providing a potential example of intrinsic motivation. Thus, the exercise can be a means of integrating class content.

3) Session Description and Plan:

This session will be highly active, with an interactive discussion between stages.

1. Introduction: 3-4 Minutes

Participants will be divided into 4-8 person teams (depending on space and the number of people). Simple instructions will be given, including a very brief description that each team will be tossing a tennis ball among its members. Participants will be told the tennis ball can be tossed to anyone else in the team, except the person who tossed the ball to them. The tennis balls will then be distributed and the first stage will begin.

2. First Stage: 3-5 Minutes

Participants will be toss the ball in their group for 3-5 minutes. This stage is usually the most active, because the ball often is not caught and/or is poorly thrown.

3. First Debrief and Guidelines for Second Stage: 4-5 Minutes

A quick debrief is conducted asking two questions. The participants will be asked to rate how much fun and enjoyment they got out of the session. They will also be asked how effective and productive (was the ball caught enough during the first stage?). Typically, the first stage rates very high in enjoyment, but low in effectiveness. Instructions are then given on how to be sure the person to whom the ball is thrown is ready to catch it.

4. Second Stage: 3-4 Minutes

Participants will toss the ball in their group, using the instructions they have just been given.

5. Second Debrief and Guidelines for Third Stage: 4 Minutes

The participants will be asked to rate this stage on both productivity and enjoyment. It will be noted that effectiveness (productivity) usually is much higher in this stage, but enjoyment is lower. More detailed instructions on how prepare to the toss of the ball (signaling) will be given to the participants.

6. Third Stage: 3-4 Minutes

Participants will toss the ball in their groups, using the more detailed instructions they were just given.

7. Final Debrief and Summary: 5 Minutes

Once again, participants will be asked to rate the stage in terms of effectiveness, productivity and enjoyment. Productivity typically rates higher, but enjoyment rates lower. Discussion will center on why the change in ratings occurred. The analogy of how to approach

communicating in teams will be presented. Even if time does not permit a discussion of the next topic, it will be noted that this exercise can be used to discuss job design to ensure proper levels of productivity and enjoyable tasks and how to work past the apparent trade-off between productivity and enjoyment.

4) Application to Conference theme:

Students often work in teams within individual classes, but are seldom given tools and insights for how to promote team building and development. In addition, their dominant forms of communication are Facebook, twitter and texting. As a result, students often come into teams as *ad hoc* and passive oral communicators. Teams often require real time, substantive exchanges of information, data and ideas.

Helping students understand exchanges (tennis balls and communication) in teams can help them in developing teams in their courses, as well as helping them develop skills they will need when they are working in environments that include people who often use different communication skills than those taught through social media.

5) Unique Contribution to OBTC:

This proposal has not been presented before. It has been used in university classes, as well as in leadership and coaching programs.