**Building Leadership Blindfolded: Enhancing Teamwork and Communication through the Blindfold Tower of Blocks Game**

**Introduction**

The blindfold tower of blocks game is a team-building activity used in various leadership and communication workshops. The game is designed to enhance teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills. Effective teamwork, communication, and leadership skills are paramount for organizational success in today's dynamic business environment. In contemporary management education, the demand for graduates possessing strong communication, teamwork, and leadership skills is higher than ever. Hence, I use this game in class for management students. The Blindfold Tower of Blocks Game addresses this need by offering a hands-on experiential exercise tailored for late undergraduate and postgraduate students in management education by emphasizing universal communication principles. In an era where diverse teams are the norm, this exercise equips students with vital interpersonal skills essential for contemporary workplaces.

This interactive session explores a unique experiential learning activity designed to cultivate these essential skills within teams. Participants engage in a hands-on experience where blindfolded team members collaborate with their peers, relying solely on verbal instructions to construct a tower using building blocks. This engaging exercise serves as a metaphor for the challenges faced in the business world, emphasizing the importance of clear communication, trust, and adaptability.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

Rooted in experiential learning theories and drawing from communication and leadership literature, the Blindfold Tower of Blocks Game exercise aligns with established pedagogical approaches in management education. Students/participants gain insights into team dynamics, leadership styles, and decision-making processes by engaging in real-time problem-solving. The session contributes to effective teaching by bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application, enhancing students' abilities to translate classroom concepts into tangible communication and leadership skills crucial for managerial roles.

The game is firmly rooted in experiential learning theories, particularly Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), which posits that learning occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The Blindfold Tower of Blocks Game embodies the four-stage learning cycle: concrete experience (playing the game), reflective observation (debriefing and analyzing the experience), abstract conceptualization (drawing connections between the activity and real-world scenarios), and active experimentation (applying lessons learned). By engaging in this cycle, participants internalize communication, teamwork, and leadership concepts. By engaging in hands-on problem-solving, participants experience team dynamics and leadership challenges directly, facilitating reflective observation and subsequent conceptualization of effective communication and leadership strategies.

Furthermore, the exercise aligns with the Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969), which asserts that effective leaders adapt their styles based on the readiness level of their followers. During the game, participants naturally shift between leadership roles, adapting their communication styles based on the evolving needs of their team members. This hands-on experience provides a practical understanding of situational leadership, highlighting the importance of flexibility and adaptability in leadership effectiveness. By synthesizing these theories, the session contributes to effective teaching and learning in the field of management. It provides a platform for students to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application, fostering a deep understanding of communication and leadership concepts in real-world contexts.

**Learning Objectives**

By participating in this activity, students are expected to

* Enhance Communication Skills: Develop clear and precise verbal communication abilities, emphasizing active listening and articulation.
* Build Trust and Collaboration: Understand the role of trust in teamwork, fostering collaboration and mutual reliance.
* Adapt Leadership Styles: Recognize and adapt leadership styles based on context, highlighting situational leadership principles.
* Improve Decision-Making: Experience collective decision-making processes within teams, emphasizing the importance of informed choices.

**Exercise Overview**

* Ideal group size: The exercise is suitable for a small group of participants, approximately 30-40 students. So, I run the exercise in my workshops, which are 40 or less in size.
* Timings: The exercise spans 60 minutes, including a 45-minute gameplay and a 15-minute debriefing session, depending upon the number of team members. For five to six group members, it takes around 60 minutes.
* Materials: Building blocks (any staking cups or blocks designed for toddlers), blindfolds, and a timer

 A black eye mask with straps

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* Flow of the Exercise: Teams are formed, and each team is asked to select two participants. One will play the role of a leader, and the other one will be a blindfolded follower. The participants, playing blindfolded followers, will leave the room. The leader will decide on strategies with the team members in 5 minutes. When ready, the blindfolded participant will enter the room. The blindfolded follower will rely on verbal communication from the leader to pick the blocks dispersed on the floor and construct towers in less than 5 minutes. The game challenges participants' communication and leadership skills in a timed setting.
* Debriefing Guidelines: Facilitators guide participants through a reflective discussion, probing responses to specific challenges faced during the game. Key questions explore:
  + - communication breakdowns: clarity in goal and communication v/s miscommunication,
    - adaptive leadership strategies,
    - team trust-building experiences.

**Session Description**

The original session can be 60 minutes, but it can be altered to a small session of 20-30 minutes by selecting four volunteers representing two teams. We can adjust the number of teams depending on the size of the session, but a maximum of three teams can be accommodated within 30 minutes.

Introduction (2 mins): Brief presentation on the significance of effective communication and adaptive leadership in modern management. Brief introduction of the Blindfold Tower of Blocks Game.

Gameplay (10-15 mins): Participants will be formed into two teams; each team will select two volunteers, and one will volunteer to play blindfolded follower. The followers will leave the room until the game starts, so they are not aware of the strategies the group discusses with the leader. Leaders from both teams will be given 5 minutes to discuss the strategies with the team members. Meanwhile, blocks will be set on the floor at different places. Once ready, one blindfolded person will enter the room. The leader will verbally guide the follower to pick the blocks and build a tower in 5 minutes. Team members may contribute to the verbal direction if it is a part of their strategy. Once done, another blindfolded person will enter the room and repeat the game. A timer will be run for both the play and the person who completes the tower in less time is the winning team.

Debriefing Session (10-20 mins): Facilitators lead a reflective discussion, encouraging participants to share their experiences and insights. Participants analyze challenges faced, successful communication strategies, and the impact of trust on decision-making. The following questions will be asked to the participants:

Questions for the leader:

* How was your overall experience?
* Do you think you offered clear communication and guidelines?
* Do you believe the follower was listening to your guidelines? Why?
* What situational changes did you make in your leadership?
* What could you have done differently? Learning from your mistakes?

Questions for the blindfolded follower:

* How was your overall experience?
* Did you clearly understand what you were supposed to do?
* Do you think you were given clear directions?
* Did you receive support and confidence from the leader?
* Did you trust your leader? Why?
* What could you have done differently? Learning from your mistakes?

There will be open floor for participants to share their learning and engage in a facilitated discussion on applying the exercise's principles in real-life management scenarios.

This session ensures active engagement by immersing participants in an interactive and challenging environment, promoting experiential learning and encouraging participants to apply newfound skills in diverse management contexts.

References:

Kolb, D. A. (1984). Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development. Prentice-Hall.

Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K. H. (1969). Life Cycle Theory of Leadership. Training and Development Journal, 23(5), 26-34.