

"Stoopid" Games Explained

By Bruce Hodes

So as we approach 2011, where are we? Well, clearly we have hit bottom and shed a lot of jobs. There is less pain and still pain. As companies, there has been mass configuration and we are doing more with less. This is going to continue in 2011 as is the possibility for focus, innovation and growth. These components will be coveted and appreciated in the coming months.

Why "Stoopid" Games

First of all, I do not want to admit that I am not good at the games nor do I particularly like them. I do feel they are invaluable in teaching business groups who are truly interested in improving their performance and how to tangibly do that. For the past twenty years, we have used experiential learning as a modality for teaching and developing our clients-st least that is how an academic would name it. For us, they are "stoopid" games and they are useful because they give groups a practice field for their performance and development.

First, to establish, they really are "stoopid" or as it is usually spelled, stupid. One can argue and I do, after a few drinks, that all games are stupid. I mean, give me a break about football, catch a ball and then everyone over 200 pounds leaps and pounces on you? I don't think so. Also, in baseball, have a small ball thrown at you at over 90 MPH and then try to hit it with a stick – and that is fun. You are kidding right?

However, in the world, these two mentioned games among many, many others are called fun and sanctified. So, then having a marble roll down a PVC pipe into a cup and then celebrate victory you got be on drugs. Or, get a group of people over a fake supposed river in less than ten minutes by walking on blue squishy things that really belong in a health club and celebrate that as a wildly successful phenomenon is insane. That is what we do-marble in pipes and blue squishy things as stepping stones. We are paid by clients to do it with them ---quite a bit actually.....

So why? Groups, if they are going to perform together, need to practice. It is obvious – the army and marines get it and they call it boot camp. Theater and dance groups get it and they call it rehearsal . Sports teams get it and they call it practice. Business groups don't get it and for the most part don't do anything and typically business groups have low group performance. Do we see a pattern here?

So that is where the stupid games come in and how they start to look like they are not so stupid. What I have seen is they let groups take a look at their behavior to look at how they can improve their performance. The notion is simple. A group solves a problem the way it does because the people are the same. Dynamics are the dynamics whether back at the ranch or at the stupid game.

The major difference is if the group back at the ranch does not perform well there are consequences internally and with customers. If the group does not perform well at the stupid game, it is an opportunity to learn big time and there are no consequences except that you are having fun and laughing at yourself.

So what do groups learn? Here are the lessons that I have seen learned over and over again. There is a game called the tent pole. Using just their index finger, the group is supposed to lower the tent pole down to the ground. At no time are you to lose contact with the pole. The fingers are all under the tent pole and it goes up. People scream and yell at each other. Blame is heaped on some poor scoundrel. It's all great fun. One of the things that is typically said is that there is no one or appointed leader and that is why the chaos occurred. That is the obvious and agreed upon answer. Where groups are blind and what is missing is listening. No one is. That is what will make the difference. Once the group is providing listening, anyone can lead. Once listening is present, understanding and problem solving can occur. Focus can occur. Prior to focus, there is reaction and yelling. Listening and the power of listening is one lesson I have seen groups get.

Another learning that groups have gotten from "stupid" idiotic games is an appreciation of practice and that to improve a group's performance will indeed take practice and learning. Upon this revelation, during "stooped" game drama, groups relax. They get that it is ok to make mistakes and learn from that. In fact, that is why we are stupid gaming. We become safe with each other. I have corporate groups that have played the same game innumerable times over a decade and always get value from them. The standards can change, the learning's can change, the parameters can change and it still all is training and development.

There is failure and then there is failure. This is still another lesson that can be learned in "stupid" game land. Whenever humans learn and develop, there is failure and the not doing of something. The problem is that with failure there are consequences. So in business when a group alienates a customer, there are consequences. With a stupid game, when the group alienates the customer who is really the bozo facilitator pretending to be a customer, there is potentially learning and development. This also goes back to the games as a practice field that is safe and in which the group can learn and develop.

Planning makes the difference both in stupid games and in the real world of business. Over and over our clients have demonstrated the power of what Dwight Eisenhower said. "The plan is useless. Planning is everything." Stupid games give access to this lesson. Some of the games, like in life, you can run and gun and be successful... But with the cube if you run at that puppy it will eat you up and spit you out.

Picture ,if you will that, the PVC Cube glares at the group daring it to come forward and accumulate 26 points. It is big and white - a large cube made of gleaming PVC pipe perched on top of a bucket like something from Millennium Park. Any slight push or graze by the group as they attempt to pass through the cube in their quest for points sends it tumbling to the ground. The consequence then is lose all your points and begin all over again.

To be successful at the cube planning must be present. Everyone needs to know when they are going and what they are doing. Even if you do not do the plan during the game the discipline of planning supports the group's success. That is an invaluable lesson when lived and demonstrated with real clients in real situations back at the ranch. Group planning works.

Another learning for groups is that everything that happens in organization happens by design. The same applies also in stupid games. It is like this. Don't plan – pay the price. Don't listen , pay the price. Argue and fight, pay the price. Collaborate and problem solve, move the ball, solve the problem , be successful. The axiom of garbage in and garbage out is abundantly clear in the land of stupid games. Just like if you put quality into the preparation and planning of the stupid game, you will get quality out.

Research is overwhelming. If you want group performance, unless you give a looooooong time and have some luck, it is not just going to happen without at least some training and development. The group needs a safe place to develop itself, practice and improve. That is where experiential education aka the stupid games come in. All you need is some props, some empty space and a weekly twenty minute period.