Stupid Games
Build teams, teach principles.

By Bruce Hodes

A stupid game is a team-building activity used to teach business principles and ideas. In training and development, the games are called *experiential education*. Groups need to practice to perform and execute tasks. The military calls it *boot camp*. Theater and dance groups call it *rehearsal*. Sports teams call it *practice*. Often, however, business groups do not get it and for the most part do not practice—and typically, business groups have low group performance.

Stupid Games enable groups to exam-ine their behavior and discover how they can improve their performance. A group solves problems during games the way it does back at the office. The major difference is that if the group doesn't perform well at work, there are consequences internally and with customers. If the group does not perform well at the *Stupid Game*, it is a big-time learning opportunity.

For 20 years, I've used *Stupid Games* as a modality for teaching and training our clients. Stupid Games are invaluable, since they give groups a practice field where they can learn, plan, practice, develop skills, work together and improve performance.

• *Listening and learning.* What do groups learn? One common excuse is that no one was appointed the leader. But lack of leadership does not drive failure, rather the inability of the group to listen to and hear each other. *Listening makes the difference.* Once members listen to one another, anyone can lead; understanding and problem-solving occur, people focus and work together.

• *Practicing.* When people realize that practice is necessary, drama ends and people relax. Participants see that it is okay to make mistakes and learn from them. With my long-term clients, I use the same *stupid games* repeatedly. The games might exasperate the leadership groups, but participants recognize their value. Over time, groups who play these games are better at listening, executing and performing tasks together. In this case, practice does make perfect.

• *Planning.* Planning and great execution make the difference. Dwight Eisenhower said, "During the battle, plans are useless, but before the battle, planning is indispensable." *Stupid Games* teach groups this lesson. In some games, as in life, you can wing it and still succeed. In business winging it can work at time; however this method can also lead to failure.

This is what happens in the game called *The Cube*. Picture a giant cube made of white PVC pipes. The cube is perched on top of a bucket. The objective is for participants to move through the cube to earn points without knocking the cube over. Groups must plan to succeed at the Cube. Everyone needs to know when he or she is making the pass and what technique will be used. Even if the group doesn't follow the plan, the planning supports the group's success. Making time to plan is an invaluable lesson that, when applied, improves team performance.

• *Satisfying the customer.* I once worked with a company to improve its customer service and relationships. I was asked to help the leadership group develop action plans. To start the session, the group played the game *lower-the-tent-pole-to-the-ground*. I instructed: "I'm the customer. I want you to lower this tent pole to the ground while balancing it on your index fingers. None of your fingers can ever lose contact with it. All fingers must be under and perpendicular to pole. No other body parts can touch the pole. You have 3 minutes to do this. The faster you can get the tent pole to the floor the better."

The activity started. The pole went up instead of down. Fingers lost contact with the pole. People yelled, and blamed each other. Then the groups calmed down. Everyone focused on completing the task. The participants started listening to each other and eventually lowered the pole to the ground. They felt good about it. They had collaborated and worked as a team. However, during the exercise, no one talked to me, the customer. I, the ignored customer, was sobbing. How did this happen? Why was I neglected?

After the game, we discussed the task and defined *good customer service*. We agreed that the team worked together. Then we talked about how the neglected customer in this game mirrored what was happening to their customers. The group completed the task but did not make me a raving fan customer or give me any attention. "How could the customer have been more involved?" I asked. "Did you clarify expectations prior to undertaking the task? Did you ask for any feedback? After completing the task, did you thank this customer or explore what other services he might need?" No.

I asked, "When you saw that you were going to be late, did you tell the customer? Is the customer notified of late arrivals and deliveries?" "No," they said. "How does the customer feel about this?" I asked. "It's been a complaint," they admitted. I said, "Fixing the communication problem and keeping the customer in the loop during this game will help you find ways to keep your customers better informed once you are back at your business."

Playing Stupid Games provides the group a practice field and allows them to discover obstacles to successful work. They can take what they learn from our discussions back to work and use to implement solutions to problems.

• *Teamwork.* I worked with a manufacturing company that suffered from declining profits due to production and quality problems. We played the *Plank Game*. The groups had to construct all three sets of planks in 20 minutes. In the post-game debrief, we looked at *sharing between groups* and what could be gained by being more interactive and communicative at work. They then designed a process to enhance communication and performance during shift handoffs, greatly improving production quality and shift relationships.

In *Stupid Games*, participants learn: don't plan, and pay the price. Don't listen, and pay the price. On the other hand, *collaborate, and move the ball*. Solve the problem, and be successful. If you put quality into the preparation and planning of the *Stupid Game*, you'll get quality results. *Stupid Games* can be used to make points and bring a group together. Typically, businesses will utilize outside facilitators and resources to facilitate the games, but internal people can also be trained to facilitate. **SSE**

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