The New Leadership Construct:

What Happens When a Flat Organization Builds a Tall Tower?

**Abstract**

When the Block Tower Building activity surfaced some forty years ago, it was to designed to illustrate the managerial skill of directing subordinates in exactly how to "stack up" the results required by management. However, in today's more horizontal organizations, with a premium placed on non-hierarchical leadership of a diverse workforce, teams are expected to achieve "toweringly" higher results. This exercise is meant to reflect new organizational realities and presents a redesigned tower building exercise. The exercise examines the issue of who really leads in non-hierarchical, self-managed team settings. The design reflects new thinking about effective organizations and new ways of interpreting emergent organizational dynamics.

**What the Session Offers to ELA Participants**

This proposal shares a simple, portable, yet powerful exercise that has teams competing to build the highest single tower in allotted times. Its purpose is to model the experience of diverse, multi-functional teams performing in today's more horizontally structured organizations. Participants will be actively engaged in a tower building competition and a facilitated discussion of learning. This activity has been used many times by the presenters in different course and training situations and has dependably good outcomes in terms of engagement. It can introduce a course or be used to highlight leadership, motivation, team behavior, and dynamics of competition. ELA participants will come away with all the materials needed to run the exercise and information on ways to debrief the exercise for maximum learning impact.

**Preferred Session Length**: 60 minutes (1st choice); 45 minutes (also possible)

**Special Requirements**

All that is needed are tables around which groups of 4 - 8 can operate, a set of directions for each participant, and a large box of 1/4" sugar cubes. The exercise needs at least two groups to compete but has been successfully run with as many as 8-10 groups all working in the same room. No electronic presentation technology is required.

**Introduction**

This proposal shares a simple, portable, yet powerful exercise that has teams competing to build the highest single tower in allotted times. Its purpose is to model the experience of diverse, multi-functional teams performing in today's more horizontally structured organizations. Like the original Block Tower Building leadership exercise of the 1970’s, this new tower building centers upon prescribed acts of leading and following. However, since evolving from the original tower building concept, the "leading questions" now are: "Who's really leading in the horizontal organization?” And "What is the nature of 'leading' when teams act as one?"

**Overview of the Exercise**

The approach is to take The Block Tower Leadership activity*,* a group dynamics classic from the 70's and reengineer it so that it simulates organizations operating along principles of multi-functionality and flat organizational structure. The exercise, is called the "The Tower of Team Power" to stress the aspect of the work. This new tower exercise gives participants the experience of being, momentarily, leader, then follower, then leader, again. Two or more teams of 4 - 8 members compete to stack the highest single tower of sugar cubes. Rounds of fast-paced production work ask for decisions to be made in real-time. Towers are raised by teams encircling their table work surface, rapidly taking turns in all the essential roles. Effective teams accept ownership of the work and learning processes in a way that is independent of "management" and/or the instructors.

The original Block Tower Leadership Game is found in Kolb, Rubin, and McIntyre's classic 1971 OB text, Organizational Psychology. That version called for a blindfolded builder, stacking with a non-dominant hand, a leader, and a score-keeper, essentially competing against pre-set standards. Using basic elements of the original game, this version redirects the learner's attention from the single powerful leader to dynamics of the self-led group. The real-time question is, "Are they really leaderless, or does leading emerge in less recognized configurations?" More specifically, this exercise has participants examining their own and others' behavior in performing a concrete task that requires full participation as a multi-disciplinary, self-managed team. To achieve this, there is now a constant rotation of participants doing (and improving upon) the work previously done by single builders in the original exercise. The towers are still built one block at a time; now, with small cubes of sugar rather than larger children's blocks as a symbol of the current reality of precision in all aspects of service and manufacturing (and because it is more fun!).

As in the original design, the follower (now known as the "builder") is made dependent on the leader by being blindfolded. Their vision is only obscured for the stacking of one cube, before rotating ahead, to replace and become the "all-seeing" leader. The tower is built by the hands of all team members, not just the hand of one subordinate, as in the old tower experience. To make the moment of stacking more challenging, the builder still uses the non-dominant hand. Team goals for each round of tower building still must be set before building begins but include competitive strategy (play safe or go for the big win), skills assessment ( who goes first and last), and effective communication skills.

This goals that are developed belong to the whole team, not just a leader and follower as in the original. Further, the new version rewards surpassing pre-set height objectives and risking more for an edge over opposing teams. The builder is offered direction by the preceding person, yet the other team members are closely engaged, speaking their often unsolicited words of aid and encouragement. This blurs the boundaries of who led whom and when. The person who momentarily fills the obvious, traditional leadership position is not isolated but, rather, is a part of a conscious team effort. If the tower falls, participants do not typically blame builder or leader. They look to each other to encourage a new start with better plans and processes for building the next tower.

The "Tower" opens a window on inter- as well as intragroup influences. Players witness the work and performance of the opposing teams and examine the impact of "benchmarking" on their own decision processes. They must both compete and cooperate fairly in this hectic game environment doing nothing untoward to topple the other teams' delicate towers.

In the earlier iteration, team members waiting to "step-up" to their turn seemed like slack resources. Today's version acknowledges subtle, continual, and multiple functions. Players maintain the building site, keep inventory, observe the competition, manage the time, and rally the troops when a tower falls and needs to be re-built in half the time. Roles happen spontaneously as members learn what must be done and do it while the action unfolds. Intense attention to building activity discourages much discussion, until the brief between-round planning sessions. With scant time to assign specialization, teammates need to be able to know and do it all. Hierarchical, "chimney" functional units have been largely streamlined away in the right-sizing process in favor of multifunctional teams that take responsibility for the whole work effort.

**Conducting the Exercise**

Rules of the game and raw materials will be provided by the facilitators. Copies will be available to participants as well as guidelines and suggestions for debriefing. At the end of the exercise, we hope that participants will see why this is the facilitators’ favorite experiential exercise. We hope it might become yours as well.