

Tennis Ball Exercise Facilitation

Facilitation:

Time Needed - 30 minutes (not including set-up)

Setup:

- You will need 3 tennis balls, a timer, two pieces of flip chart paper and a marker for each team. If flip chart paper is not available, you can use 2 copies of the rules (the 3 rules are listed on page 1) for each team and a blank sheet of paper for the timekeeper to keep the times for each round.
- Write the tennis ball rules on flipchart paper (one flip chart paper per team) so that they can see the rules throughout the exercise. *Note:* The rules of the exercise aren't revealed at the start, so keep them hidden from view until you get to the part of the facilitation where they are revealed and reviewed.
- Have a second flipchart sheet and a marker available to record the times for each team.
- Divide into teams of 8-12; if there are people who don't want to participate in the activity (and/or people with mobility challenges), can serve as "consultants" to a team (but not a part of the team) and/or be time keepers
- Ask each team of 8-12 participants to stand in a circle without crowding each other (if space is tight, feel free to find a space outside of the room; make sure to take the supplies with you).

Establish the process:

- With one tennis ball in hand, Say "We are going to create a process aimed at having everyone touch the ball."
- Toss the ball to someone on the opposite side of the circle from where you are standing.
- Tell that person to pass the ball to someone, and to remember who touches the ball after them
- Have the next person pass the ball to someone new, and so on until everyone has had a turn.
- Say, "let's see if we can remember the sequence that the ball travels in", and ask them to do this one more time without you (so the first person you passed the ball to will now always start this process)

Complicate the process:

- Say “We never do one thing at a time – we’re always multitasking.” Add in a second ball for them to pass around in the same sequence following the first ball.
- Once they have the process down, hand the three balls to the first person and have them pass the three balls around in the same sequence.

REVEAL THE RULES NOW.

Tennis Ball Rules:

- 1. Each person on the team must touch each ball once**
- 2. Each person on the team must touch each ball in the same order each time**
- 3. No person on the team can hold the balls the whole time**

- Say “We don’t just multitask – we are usually working under time pressure. So now we will time how long this takes you.”
- Before timing them, go over the rules (reading them aloud) and ask if everyone understands them. Once you have clarified the rules (general rule of thumb, if it isn’t explicitly prohibited in the rules, the team can do it), you are ready to begin timing them on their process.
- Call START when the first ball leaves the hand of the first person, and STOP when the third ball touches the hand of the last person.
- Have them do a round. Time them, call out the time and record it as the baseline (on the flipchart provided).

Incremental Improvement:

- Ask: “Do you think you can do it faster?” Let the group repeat a few times or until they are happy with the progress they have made (and they are doing it without dropping the balls).
- **Repeat the rules after every round.**
 - Each person on the team must touch each ball once
 - Each person on the team must touch each ball in the same order each time
 - No person on the team can hold the balls the whole time

- Call out and record their time for each iteration of the process.

First Challenge:

- Say "You should be proud of getting your speed down to __ seconds. However, every group that has done this exercise (and this has been done thousands of times) has been able to bring it down to less than 3 seconds".
- Most groups figure out how to change their positions and routines (eliminating their own rules that aren't explicitly included in the three written rules) so they can get the time down to 2-3 seconds.
- Don't give any hints! Play it straight.
- If they are not coming up with any new ideas, ASK: "Should you rethink what you're doing and how you are doing it?" If they are really stuck, ask them "Are you doing something that the rules don't require you to do?"

Second Challenge:

- Continue to record their time- if they beat 3 seconds and you still have time, tell them that nearly 90% of groups have done it in less than 1 second!

Ending the Exercise

After 20 minutes of iterative improvement, or when at least most teams have gotten their time to 3 seconds or less you can finish the exercise.

Sample of Proven Methods to get below 1 second (not to be shared before the debrief)

- Have one person not on the team hold the balls (this can be a facilitator, timer or bystander, etc). All team members line up closely in the same order with just one finger out to touch each ball. The non-team member quickly "swipes" all three balls by the finger of each team member
- Have one person not on the team hold the balls (this can be a facilitator, timer or bystander, etc). All team members line up closely in the same order and, each using one finger, create a short slide (sharp angle) that each ball can quickly slide down

Debrief (10 minutes)

- Have the teams join back together to report their scores
- Ask each team how they got to their best time and the lessons they learned along the way (consider asking the winning team to replicate their process/result in front of everyone)

- Try to get them to identify as many of the goals of this exercise (on page 1) as possible (you can formulate questions to help “lead” them a bit as needed)
- Ask the winning team if they could have imagined they would be able to improve their time to x seconds (their winning time) after their first timed round.