

**Field Notes: Team Trek for Thirty**  
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This is a fascinating exercise which simulates organizational communication. I like doing it with large numbers, and so this design is for 24-thirty people. It can be done for lesser numbers of people, just adjust the number of team trek devices accordingly.

**The Team Trek Device.**

I order mine from Interel. We are their value added resalers, so if you are interested in making this investment, please order them through the Ronin Group. They make by far, the safest and the most portable. You can make your own out of 4x4s and rope, but I have found these to be on the dangerous side. It is very easy to fall off and get a sprained ankle.

**Materials**

For Thirty people you will need the following:

- Three Team Trek Devices.
- At least thirty bandannas, all different colors. They must be large enough to be used as blindfolds.
- Six small road cones - bright orange is best.
- A camera or video. This exercise is hilarious and it photographs extremely well.

**The Set Up**

- Place The Three Team Trek devices in the field. Make sure that they are at least thirty yards from each other. Note: The devices should be rolled tightly together with the straps tucked inside. They are placed next to each other. Take the road cones and set them up about fifty yards from the Team Trek devices. Measure this distance off carefully and make it the same for each team. This should be done well ahead of time.
- Have the thirty people assemble and sit in a large circle. Divide the group into three groups by having the participants count off by threes.
- Give out the bandannas. Tell each team to choose to make one half of their members blind by having these members put on blindfolds. Make sure that these people cannot see a thing!
- Tell the sighted team members that, until the end of the exercise, they are to be mute. They are not permitted to say another word.
- Verbally give the following instructions:

This initiative is an exercise in organization communications.

You will be tested to the very limit of your ability in solving this problem. You will have all the materials you need to successfully solve it. Your challenge will be how to capitalize on the strengths of your entire team.

Each team is composed of one half blind members and one half mute members.

In a few moments each team will be taken to its starting point. There you will find a tool that will enable your team to cross an electrified field. The field is outlined very clearly. Be sure that no team members touch the field in any way. They will immediately receive a terrible shock and your team will have to start over.

Your task is to use the tool to get everyone from the starting point though the road cones at the opposite end. Successful completion will mean that everyone has crossed safely.

You will have thirty minutes to complete this task. At the end of the thirty minutes we will reconvene as a large group and discuss how we successfully solved this problem.

A facilitator will now lead you to your starting points. Please make sure you take very good care of your blind teammates.

- A facilitator now leads each team to a starting point. At the starting point. Ask the blindfolded team members to sit, while you show their sighted members the tool and the boundaries of the electric field. When all of the teams have been assembled, blow the starting whistle and shout BEGIN!

### **What To Look For:**

Remember this is an exercise in organization communications. And you have set up three complex variables. 1) You have given a group of high achievers a complicated task. You have set a short time frame (30) minutes. and (3) you have handicapped them.

Given these variables here is what we see most often. See if it occurs with your group. The mute members, will immediately jump to task. They will start unrolling the devices and try to figure out what to do with them. This usually takes a fair amount of the time.

The mute members will completely forget about their other team members, those blindfolded. They will write them off as baggage- something to deal with after "we" figure this out.

The blindfolded members will be seated and hearing a lot of activity going on around them. They will be uncomfortable not being invited to participate. They will resent this, and in their resentment, they will come together. They will laugh, tell stories, and forget about the task. They will not see themselves as either relevant or important. Sometimes they will start trashing the task and their fellow teammates. Sometimes they will even make the statement that this seems very much like our company.

At some point the mute members will figure out a solution. It may or may not be to use the device as a set of skis. Many times they simply walk out on one, toss the other one and walk out on that one, and so forth. This is not a great solution but I am continually surprised how many groups discover it and use it. It is rare that groups ever disband a solution mid way. They tend to pick a solution, no matter how bad and try to make it work. This is also worth recording in your notes.

Whatever solution they choose, the mute people must then bring the blind people on board. For some reason, they think this will be easy. The blind members tend to be a bit resistant, having lost interest in the task and have begun to enjoy just talking to each other. Their lack of investment in the outcome is often quite dramatic.



What often happens is a light bulb goes off for the blind people. They realize that they are the key to solving this problem. If they in unison say Left, and everyone moves their left foot, and then say Right, and so forth, they have the solution. Note: This never happens with other solutions.

### **Debriefing Team Trek**

Have people talk generally about the experience for a few minutes. Ask them what they think they learned.

Have the mute people tell their story. What was it like? How did they decide on a solution? How did they communicate? Did they think about their mute team members and when.

Then ask the blind people to tell their story. Follow the themes and use supporting documentation from your notes and the notes of the other facilitator(s).

Have them address their successes and their failures.

Ask them to relate this experience to real work. Does the exercise simulate some experiences from our own company / organization? Make them be specific.

In our company who are the mute people?  
Who are the blind people?

*Lately the response we are getting is that the blind people in companies are those who cannot or will not embrace the personal computer. They can not see e-mail, group ware, etc. They are left out of important conversations and are not able to keep up with others in the company. Sometimes the blind are computer-phobic executives!*

Follow this discussion until the energy runs its course.

End the exercise with a whip around with Emerson's Question: What have you learned?

### **Linking the Debrief up with The Wisdom of Teams and the Drexler Sibbet Team Performance Model**

According to Drexler Sibbet, this exercise retards the development of a team because of the handicaps imposed. Because of the blind members inability to understand how they can contribute, they cannot resolve the orientation stage. Furthermore they can never resolve the trust issues or get clear on their roles and goals. The mute people stick to task and hardly ever make the intervention necessary to enable the blind members to buy into the effort. Hence there is little commitment and implementation suffers.

In terms of Katzenbach and Smith, The Wisdom of Teams, these same factors prevent the interdependence from being discovered. Thus they can never reap the benefits of becoming a real team.

To prove these points, I often have the participants play another round after they understand these issues. This amounts to a race of the three teams. And for fun, you can have them switch their blindfolds with the mute team members. The result is an instant pop into high performance! Have fun!