

The Human Knot

Objective

One of the most simple and effective team challenges to use is what is commonly called the Human Knot. The typically brief exercise powerfully communicates the importance of the Seven “C’s” of Championship Team Building. I often use the challenge to kickoff team building when I work with teams because it is so easy and effective.

Setup

The Human Knot exercise requires an even number of people to accomplish. You need at least six people to do the exercise. Six can complete it relatively quickly and easily, eight to ten people makes it more difficult and a bit longer, and twelve and above can be a real challenge. Thus, if you have a team of 12 or more people I recommend you break them up into groups of roughly six when you first begin. You can always make it more challenging later once they get the hang of it.

Instructions

Have the even-numbered group(s) form a small circle. Instruct them to raise their right hand. Have them join hands with a person who is standing across from them. Then have them raise their left hand and instruct them to join it with a different person other than the person whose right hand they are holding. Make sure that they are not holding the hand of a person next to them. These instructions should result in a tangled mass of arms in the middle of the circle, hence a Human Knot.

The group’s challenge is to untangle themselves while still hanging on the each other’s hands. The players can rotate their wrists and hands for comfort but they must remain in contact with each other throughout the entire exercise. The goal is to get the group into one large complete circle or two smaller interconnected circles (much like two rings joined together.) The group should continue the challenge until one of the two goals is achieved. To eventually add a greater degree of difficulty to the exercise, challenge the group to complete it without talking.

Groups of six tend to accomplish the goal pretty quickly – usually no more than a minute or two. Larger groups can take more time, from five to 20 minutes or longer. If a group is struggling and becoming frustrated after several efforts, you can present them with a choice. They can either proceed as is or they can begin again with a second attempt by untangling and then re-tangling their arms in a different configuration. Stress that the decision must be a unanimous group decision. Rarely is a solution not possible. If however, the team cannot complete the challenge, allow them to start over and you can make the point that some issues require different approaches.