

Unseen Obstacles

June 2, 2014 | by [Abigail R. Kies, MBA and Michelle Tillis Lederman, CPA, MBA, CEC](#)

Primary Market

Teambuilding, Corporate Training

Character Focus

Communication, Cooperation, Teamwork, Strategic Thinking, People Development, Leadership

Items Needed

One Toobeez set, 70 feet of rope, Wide color 12-inch ribbons (one color for every team; three pieces in each color), Flip chart

The Overview

“Leaders are more powerful role models when they learn than when they teach.”

Rosabeth Moss Kantor

Description

The group is split into pairs instructed to guide each other through a delineated area filled with obstacles.

Materials

- One Toobeez set
- 70 feet of rope
- Wide color 12-inch ribbons (one color for every team; three pieces in each color)
- Flip chart

Time Required

Setup: 10 minutes

Activity: 25 – 45 minutes

Debrief: 20 minutes (minimum)

Group Size: 4 – 24 participants

Space: 20 x 40 (minimum room size)

Open space – no chairs, tables, etc.

The Activity Setup

Using the long rope, create a round space with squiggly sides (so participants cannot easily send their partners along the border). Inside the space created by that border, now referred to as the “active zone”, place a complete Toobeez set (52 pieces) randomly. As you layout the Toobeez, avoid leaving direct walk ways through the active zone. For a more challenging activity, make some three-dimensional obstacles by connecting multiple Toobeez. Once the activity zone is set, tie the color ribbons along the border so that two ribbons of the same color are across the zone from each other. The third is to mark the participant in the active zone

with his/her team color.



Instructions

Facilitator Script

In this activity, you will be working with a partner. As a team, both of you will need to get yourselves through the active zone, which is the area inside this rope border (indicate area). Only one of you may be in the active zone at any given time. Whenever you are in the active zone, you must be blindfolded.

It is your partner's job to navigate you safely through the active zone avoiding any objects or the rope edge. You will be going from endpoint to endpoint, as indicated by the color ribbons. Each pair will have its own color, and you will go through the space beginning at one of your ribbons and ending at the other. The person in the active zone must have your team ribbon on his/her wrist at all times.

If at anytime the person in the active zone touches anything (i.e., Toobeez, the rope border, or another person), you must go outside to one of your endpoints and begin again. You may either switch roles back and forth each time you begin again or wait to switch roles until one person has successfully traversed the active zone.

When you're in the active zone, remember to move slowly with your hands out in front of you to avoid bumping into each other or tripping over an obstacle. As the partner on the outside, watch to make sure your blindfolded partner in the active zone does not walk into someone else or fall over anything. He/she's relying on you to be safe.

Any questions on the material covered? (Answer any questions and get teams situated). Begin.

Facilitator's Choice...

You may have people remain in the same role for a certain amount of time and switch all teams at once, or you may leave it up to the participants to manage who's doing what at any given time.

Observations and Modifications

Once the activity begins, your role as facilitator is primarily to observe. As the activity progresses, if you find that the layout is too easy to navigate, you may choose to move the Toobeez midway through as well. If participants challenge you as you move objects around, comment that unexpected things come up everyday.

Listen and look for the following: How people communicate and demonstrate leadership. The questions below, based on the primary Learning Intentions, are provided to guide your observations.

Communication

In this activity, communication is controlled by the guidelines of the exercise. People may strategize before entering the active zone, or they may jump right in. Regardless, how do they exchange ideas with their partners? Listen and notice:

- How are people addressing each other (orderly, respectfully, deferentially, or confrontationally)?

- How does the role someone has influence how they communicate (being in the active zone versus navigating someone else through it)?
- How do people deal with and communicate around a failed attempt?

Leadership

This activity allows people to practice their leadership skills, primarily in a one-to-one interaction. During the activity, observe:

- How people lead in both roles.
- How the roles people have in any given moment impact their ownership over the outcome.

Concluding the Activity

There are two ways to complete this activity: 1) At a given time stop people wherever they are, or 2) Wait until everyone has successfully traversed the active zone.

Variations

Variations are optional and will highlight additional skill sets.

1. Highlighting: Teamwork and Cooperation, People Development

In addition to the instructions above, you will be paired according to your chain of reporting. Managers will be the ones blindfolded and a direct report will be the one guiding you through the active zone.

2. Highlighting: Strategic Thinking

In addition to the instructions above, teams will have five minutes to plan and strategize before they are allowed to enter the active zone.

The Debrief

The debrief should be an interactive discussion. Lead it by offering a series of questions and soliciting responses from the participants. To begin, ask questions about the activity itself and continue with specifics related to the skills you want to address or highlight. You may stick to one area of focus or choose to cover many topics. Suggested questions are offered below to guide you as you facilitate this debrief.

The debrief is organized with an Opening and Closing and then by Learning Intention, and it may be used in a variety of ways. You may use just the Opening and Closing for a basic debrief or add the Learning Intention-specific debriefs in between. To include the Learning Intention specifics in your debrief, either pick one or two questions from each area in order to touch on many topics or work in depth on one or more areas of learning and go through all of the questions for that topic(s). Look through the questions, TIPs, FCs, and Transitions prior to the training session in order to choose which ones you will cover (see “How to Use this Book”).

Opening

The intention of this activity is to develop project management skills and enhance communication among participants. However, this activity offers many lessons, so let the participants share with you what they learned and their comments as to the purpose of the activity.

- What do you think the exercise was about?
- How was it different being the person inside the active zone versus navigating your partner through?
- What was the biggest challenge of this activity (i.e. being blindfolded, working with your partner, working in a crowded active zone, listening to your partner and not someone else’s, getting frustrated, communicating clearly, being understood, etc.)?

Closing

This activity is a platform for new actions. We face obstacles everyday. Sometimes we can see them, sometimes we can’t, and sometimes when we can’t see what’s in our way, but someone else can. As in this activity, clear communication, an open mind, and a willingness to trust the guidance of others are critical elements of effective leadership.

Concluding Questions

- What did you learn about communication and leadership?
- What could have been done differently?
- Where else in your professional life are there obstacles blocking you? What can you now do differently to address them?

Action Plans

- How many ways can you apply what you learned in this activity to:
 - Everyday management
 - Sales process
 - Feedback and advancement
- Based on your new experiences and insights , what could be different in going forward?
- What three action steps (with specific, measurable results) will you take this month to begin incorporating what you've learned into your daily routine?

LI: Communication

People are constantly engaged in multiple levels of communication. The following questions offer participants the opportunity to increase their awareness of their communication, the impact it has on others, and the results it creates. Through this awareness, people will then get to choose the alternatives that serve their goals.

Speaking

- Did you speak up regardless of which role you had?
- Were you clear and specific when describing or asking questions about the next move?
- Did you solicit information or ask for clarification?

Listening

- How did you listen in each role?
- Did you exclusively listen to your partner, or did you also listen to others to “check ” the guidance you were receiving?

Non-Verbal

- What body language did you notice in yourself and others regardless of whether you could see at the time?
- How did your body language change as decisions were made and actions taken?
- How does your position in your organization impact how you communicated to your partner?

Summary Script

We've just had the opportunity to recognize how each of us has been communicating, and to identify role models and pitfalls.

Now you can put that information into action to create clear and comprehensive mutual understanding. So, what do you think the results will be in your organization?

LI: Leadership

Leadership is being responsible for an outcome regardless of your role or position in a situation. It includes communicating powerfully, motivating and empowering others, and creating results. Use the following questions to generate a discussion about leadership.

- How did your leadership and that of your partner contribute to your outcome?
- What limited your willingness to be a leader in this activity?
- What is the difference between leading and managing?
- What actions in others exemplify leadership in your mind?

Summary Script

Effective leaders communicate clearly, work with others, and get results. Some leaders are quiet while others are out in front where everyone can notice them. Regardless, leaders have responsibility and ownership over an outcome and the communication, people development, and management skills to create the outcome desired. Not all great communicators are extraordinary leaders. However, all extraordinary leaders are great communicators.

LI: People Development

The fundamental tool for successful people development, including for ourselves, is feedback. Excellent managers carefully observe people and communicate clearly. Outstanding employees are those that look for and listen to feedback on their own as well.

- What did you notice about how your partner participated in this activity?
- What did you admire and want to encourage?
- How can you support people to optimize what's working?
- How can you provide feedback and guidance effectively?
- How often did you request feedback from your partner?
- What are some personal pitfalls you discovered, and how can you avoid them?

LI: Teamwork and Cooperation (S)

Teamwork and cooperation includes how people interact with each other, the roles people take in group settings, and how people perceive situations – as competitive or collaborative.

- How did you and your partner work together?
- How could you have been more effective? What limited or hindered your results?
- Where in your job and career does your resistance to trusting and working with others limit your performance?
- How else could it look?

LI: Strategic Thinking (S)

Often when given a task, we want to dive right in rather than develop a strategy and plan first. Encouraging people to listen to and share their ideas keeps organizations fresh and innovative. Strategizing takes time and is often viewed as “not doing anything.” However, planned projects are more likely to meet established goals. Use the following questions to generate a discussion about strategy and creativity, its value, and how to tap into the creative ideas in everyone.

- How did you come up with the path through the active zone?
- Did you plan the whole path before having your partner begin? Were you willing to make adjustments to your plan based on results?
- How willing were you to take risks?
- What actions did you take in prior to entering the active zone to enhance your communication?
- What obstacles did you anticipate and discuss before beginning?

Key Take-Aways

- Communicating effectively includes asking clarifying questions and providing ongoing feedback.
- People can lead regardless of their roles or whether they can see everything going on.
- How we interact with others has a direct impact on our ability to develop co-workers.

About Author

Abigail R. Kies, MBA and Michelle Tillis Lederman, CPA, MBA, CEC (9 Activities)

Abigail R. Kies, MBA is the founder of Play To Win Coaching, a leadership development company. Combining her business background and powerful coaching skills, Abigail works closely with individuals, teams, and organizations from diverse backgrounds in varied situations... entrepreneurs, managers, Fortune 500 executives, artists, teachers, lawyers... to enhance communication, enrich relationships, develop leadership, and realize visions.

Michelle Tillis Lederman, CPA, MBA, CEC is the founder of Executive Essentials, a training company. She has delivered seminars internationally for corporations, universities, high schools, and non-profit organizations including: JPMorgan Chase, Deutsche Bank, Columbia Business School, and The Museum of Modern Art. Michelle is an Adjunct Professor at NYU's Stern School of Business in the Management Communications department and serves on the faculty of the American Management Association.

[All Activities of Abigail R. Kies, MBA and Michelle Tillis Lederman, CPA, MBA, CEC](#)