

Team-Building and Ice-Breaking With Centerpieces!

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GROUP, TYPE AND SIZE

This exercise was originally used as part of an evening celebration at a state conference on volunteerism. At that event there were over 400 participants, divided into tables of 10 each. The exercise can work with any group size, small or large, and is particularly well-suited to individuals of all ages.

PURPOSE

(1) To create centerpieces for the tables at a luncheon or dinner; (2) to stimulate teamwork and creativity among participants; (3) to emphasize a particular theme or message; and (4) to have fun!

TIME REQUIRED

The entire exercise takes 30–45 minutes, depending on how much time is allowed for building the centerpieces, and whether or not a judging component is included.

MATERIALS

No standard set of materials must be included, as long as there is a variety. Each table group must receive the identical set of supplies, and the cost can be kept at a minimum by using simple, everyday items. It is also important to have some type of container which holds the materials and which can be used as a

base for the centerpiece if you want them to be movable. Materials used in the original exercise included:

- large cardboard box, 8 x 12 x 5'
- pipe cleaners
- styrofoam balls
- glue stick
- plastic drinking straws
- aluminum foil
- construction paper
- paper clips
- string
- rubber bands
- marker

PROCESS

1. Prepare an identical set of supplies for each table group. Place them in the container and tape the lid shut so that the participants cannot see the contents until you are ready for them to start.

2. Place one container on each table. In the original exercise, the boxes were on the tables when everyone came into the room for dinner. There was a great deal of discussion about what the boxes were for, but we simply issued a strong warning that no one was to open the box until later on. We then conducted the exercise after the main course was finished, before dessert was served. Part of the fun was building the suspense and keeping everyone guessing!

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3. When you are ready for the exercise to begin, give clear instructions such as:

"We are now ready to test your creativity and decorate the room at the same time. In the box on your table you will find a variety of materials. When I give you the signal, you are to open the box and use its contents to construct a centerpiece. Everyone at the table is expected to contribute to the effort. Your centerpiece design should illustrate the theme of our conference. You may use *only* the items in the box, and your design must be able to be moved once it is finished; we suggest you use the box and/or the lid as a base. You have 20 minutes in which to work. At the end of that time judges will circulate to award prizes for the best designs. You may now open the box and get to work!"

4. It may take a few minutes for some folks to get involved, but before long the excitement and interest will build. There may even be a bit of playful "espionage," as individuals scout out what other tables are doing! (This should not be encouraged, but it does happen.) The time limit may be adjusted, depending on the level of creativity. The goal is to allow enough time for creativity, yet keep the pressure on so that everyone stays busy.

5. You can enhance the playful atmosphere by playing some upbeat music while the centerpieces are being built.

6. When the time is up, blow a whistle or ring a bell to stop the activity. If you are doing this in conjunction with a meal,

dessert could now be served while the judging is conducted.

7. Judges should be selected ahead of time, so that they do not participate in the activity. This is a good way to engage members of your board or advisory group, or as a way to recognize individual volunteers. They can wear headbands or badges (made from cardboard or construction paper) which denote their title of "JUDGE." A general guideline would be to assign one judge for every 4-5 table groups.

8. When the judges have reviewed all the centerpieces, they should collectively reach a decision about winners. If there is a large number of table groups, it is helpful to have more than one category of winner. For instance, prizes can be awarded for:

- Best Theme
- Craziest Looking
- Most Beautiful
- Most Practical
- Funkiest
- Most Politically Correct
- Most Sophisticated
- Best Use of All Materials

A small prize should be given to every person at a winning table.

9. Since the centerpieces have been built to be "portable," they can be used or displayed in other ways even after the event is over. Participants enjoy the opportunity to look at the various creations over a period of time, and take pride in what they did as a team.