

EXERCISE Agile Ball Point Game

Purpose 1) Give participants a fun experience that demonstrates how powerful experimentation and iterative thinking are for finding solutions and making improvements to products and processes, and 2) demonstrate how to use the Innovation Cycle.

NOTE The original version of this exercise was developed to teach Agile principles, but it applies equally well to understanding the benefits of the Innovation Cycle and iterative thinking generally. It provides an exceptionally engaging experience.

Materials Needed

- 1) Ping pong balls, or similar-sized toy balls such as those found in a children's ball pit, or tennis balls. You'll need a dozen balls per team contained in one small basket per team.
- 2) Stopwatch or timer on a phone
- 3) Matrix on your computer that can be used to project team scores. Or, this can be done on a flip chart.
- 4) Optional: Handouts listing the rules, to give to each team to refer to during the exercise.

Estimated Time Required 60-90 minutes

Instructions

Divide the group into two or more teams of 4-8 people per team, plus one observer per team. (Ask participants if anyone has played this game before and if anyone has, ask them to be an observer.) If you like, you can give teams a few minutes to get acquainted and come up with a team name.

Give each team a basket of balls.

Explain the following rules of play.

- 1) Teams compete simultaneously to see who can complete the required task and get the highest score.
- 2) The task is to pass the balls from person to person, with each ball having "air time," as quickly as possible.
- 3) Once everyone on the team has touched a ball, and it's returned to where it started, the team receives a point.
- 4) The balls may be used more than once.
- 5) If a ball is dropped and retrieved, play continues.
- 6) If a ball is dropped and not retrieved, play continues and one point is deducted from the team's score.
- 7) The observer for each team will count the number of balls passed by the team and keep track of points.
- 8) You will have 2 minutes to complete the task. The team that earns the most points within that time wins.

- 9) This rule is optional or may be introduced in later rounds: Teams may not talk during the two minutes they're passing the balls.
- 10) Put phones away. Anyone looking at their phone during this exercise is disqualified.
- 11) No balls may be harmed during this exercise.

Once the rules have been explained and any questions are answered, give the teams two minutes to complete the task. (No initial prep time.)

At the end of that time, have the observers announce the scores for each team. If you like, you can put the scores into a matrix with the teams names that you display on a screen. This will be Round 1 of five rounds.

Once scores have been collected, give the teams two minutes to discuss their strategy and plan how they can improve their score.

Hold another two-minute round of play followed by two minutes of discussion and repeat until you've completed five rounds.

The winning team is the one with the most points in the final round.

What to Expect

Initially, teams will line up or form a circle and hand the balls from person to person. Gradually they will devise other more efficient strategies. They may realize the basket is not needed, that the rules don't require that they use all the balls, and that dropping the balls in layers of hands is much more efficient than handing the balls to each other. Scores that start out in perhaps the 20s, may be 150 or more by the fifth round.

During the two minutes of discussion between rounds, teams may ask for clarification of the rules and you should answer those questions.

Teams may overhear or observe the strategies adopted by other teams and copy them. This is allowed. (So is talking softly to not be overheard.)

Don't leave out rule #11. Teams have been known to crush the balls to make them easier to handle quickly. It works but may be costly.

Discussion

Facilitate a discussion about what participants experienced and learned, drawing connections to the Innovation Cycle and iterative thinking. You can probably sustain this conversation for an hour or two.

You may want to start with general questions like:

How did that go for you and your team?

How much better did you get?

How did your team organize and did that go well?

Did a leader or leaders emerge and how did that happen?

Would having a designated leader in charge have helped? Why or Why not? What kind of leadership would have been helpful?

How important was having a shared goal?

Did anyone get upset? When? How? Why?

How was failure helpful?

How helpful was having multiple rounds? Why?

What created the biggest leaps in productivity? Skills? Practice? Expertise?

Was it helpful to have people adapt to the game, or have the game adapt to the people?

Was it helpful to keep track of your scores? Why?

Was it helpful to have more than one team working the problem?

You may also want to get more specific:

What did you observe?

What insights did you gain?

What new ideas did that give you?

How did you implement those ideas?

What did you observe as a result?

That's the Innovation Cycle!