

Helium Stick



Purpose:

The objective of this activity is for the group to lower the pole to the ground without a single person on the team losing contact with the pole. The skills developed include: problem solving, planning, communication, focus.

Group size: 8-20

Timings 20 – 60 minutes.

Space required: Minimal

Props/ equipment required: Helium stick (aluminium tent pole)



Instructions:

1. Divide your group in half and create two parallel lines facing each other. The lines should be close to each other (approx 12-18 inches apart.) The members of each line stand shoulder to shoulder.
2. Once the two lines are formed, ask everyone to hold out their index fingers at waist height.
3. You (the facilitator) then announce to the group that you will be placing an aluminium tent pole on top of their fingers.
4. **IMPORTANT** – When you place the tent pole on their fingers, do so from behind and in the middle of one of the lines keeping your hand on top of the pole to prevent the group raising it into the air. Apply enough pressure on top of the pole to prevent the group from lifting it up. (Every group always seems to want to raise the pole with their fingers before they understand the directions!)
5. Finally, with your hand on top of the pole (the helium stick) you give them the following directions:
“Your directions are as follows: As a group you must lower this tent pole to the ground without even a single person on the team losing contact with the pole. Should someone lose contact with the pole you must start again.”
6. Then release your hand from the tent pole.

Rules:

1. No one may lose contact with the pole. If anyone loses contact the entire group must start again.
2. The starting position is with the pole at waist level.
3. Both index fingers must be used and **ONLY** the index fingers may be used.
4. The index fingers must be placed below the tent pole. Nothing else is allowed to touch the pole (other than the ground at the end of the activity.)





Safety warning:

- The ends of the tent pole can be dangerous if the pole starts moving quickly and hits someone in the face. Take precautions to prevent injury.

Facilitator Notes:

- This is a VERY challenging activity; don't attempt this with groups who are in serious conflict.
- Typically, when you (the facilitator) give the directions and then release the pole, the group will often raise the pole – not lower it. The group will usually laugh and find this somewhat strange. It's likely to take several attempts to just keep the pole steady (not lowering or raising).



- This is a communication-intensive activity where each person must be absolutely committed to doing his or her part. People are likely to get frustrated and it's usual for some blaming to occur.
 - The group will probably throw out many ideas on how to solve this challenge; it usually comes down to the entire group focusing, doing their job under the direction of one leader. Groups that experience the most difficulty are usually all talking at once.
- You may have to stop the activity several times mid-stream to help the group process how they're approaching the activity.

De-briefing suggestions:

- The "helium stick" can represent many things: a task/ company vision/ change etc. When you're not focusing, the pole goes in the opposite direction; when anyone takes their eye off the task, it suffers.
- In order to achieve a successful outcome, everyone in the team needs to be committed to the process, understand their role, stay calm and focused, and not be critical or blame others.

Variations:

- Pair people up and supply each pair with a short tent pole (18 inches). Ask each pair to lower their pole to the ground so they can experience success. Then add pairs together to form groups of four, giving them a pole just long enough for four people; ask them to complete the task. Once successful, merge the groups of four together and repeat until the whole group is involved.

Acknowledgement: This activity comes from the brilliant mind of master teambuilder Viva Pizer and is reproduced courtesy of the International Association of Teamwork Facilitators.