

MARSHMALLOW CHALLENGE



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“THE STRENGTH OF THE TEAM IS EACH INDIVIDUAL MEMBER. THE STRENGTH OF EACH MEMBER IS THE TEAM.”

- Phil Jackson

MARSHMALLOW CHALLENGE

The Marshmallow Challenge is a remarkably fun and instructive design exercise that encourages teams to experience simple but profound lessons in collaboration, innovation and creativity.

The task is simple: in eighteen minutes, teams must build the tallest free-standing structure out of 20 sticks of spaghetti, one yard of tape, one yard of string, and one marshmallow. The marshmallow needs to be on top.

Surprising lessons emerge when you compare teams' performance. Who tends to do the worst? Why? Who tends to do the best? Why? What improves performance? What kills it?

Several years ago, we came across a design exercise called the Marshmallow Challenge. Though the task seems simple, it's actually pretty hard. It forces people to quickly work as a team.

So we decided to run it as part of a leadership programme and it was a huge success. There is something about the exercise that reveals the true nature of collaboration.

Since that first time, we've used the Marshmallow Challenge in leadership programmes with retailers, accountants, builders and call centres.

Most participants discover deep lessons on how to successfully complete a task that demands collaborative team working. We'd like to share some of these lessons with you.

If you need to kick-start a meeting, get a team into a creative frame of mind, or simply want to encourage your organisation to think about what it takes to truly collaborate on a task, invest 45 minutes to run a marshmallow challenge.

The whole experience is underpinned by a coaching approach, designed to be experiential in nature and encouraging reflection and insight.

WHAT HAPPENS?

Find 45-60 minutes when your team can fully engage in the challenge. It doesn't have to be part of a full blown programme. This exercise can work equally well as part of a team meeting or at the annual conference.

We've run the exercise with groups as small as four to as many as 100 people. Just make sure that each team has their own table.

In advance, create a marshmallow challenge kit for each team, with each kit containing twenty sticks of spaghetti, one yard of masking tape, one yard of string and one marshmallow. These ingredients can be placed into a bag, which simplifies distribution and hides the contents, creating the element of surprise.

Be clear about the goals and rules of the Marshmallow Challenge. Perhaps use a couple of slides to introduce the challenge as well as visually reinforcing the instructions.

Ensure everyone understands the instructions. Don't worry about repeating them too many times.

The instructions are:

- build the tallest freestanding structure, measured from the table top surface to the top of the marshmallow
- the entire marshmallow needs to be on the top of the structure
- teams can use as many or as few of the 20 spaghetti sticks, as much or as little of the string or tape
- teams cannot hold on to the structure when the time runs out

Ask if anyone has any questions before starting.

Start the countdown clock to start the challenge. Select appropriate music for the challenge. We prefer 'up tempo' pop music, but dramatic classical works well too.

After the clock runs down, ask everyone in the room to stop & sit down, so everyone can see the structures.

It is likely that just over half will still be standing!

Consider offering a prize to the winning team. A standing ovation from the rest of the group is a must.



Normally most people begin by orienting themselves to the task. They talk about what the finished structure might look like, and who does what.

Then the teams plan. They draw structures, lay out the materials and discuss the best ways to build the structure.

Soon, they are assembling the sticks and tape into ever growing structures.

Finally, as time is running out, someone picks up the marshmallow and puts it on top of the fragile structure! They all stand back in anticipation, not daring to breathe...

*Thank You!
The Marshmallow Challenge was the highlight of our day, incredibly fun and insightful! We're already reaping the rewards by working more collaboratively across teams.*

This quickly turns into a 'DOH!!' moment, as the weight of the marshmallow causes the structure to buckle and collapse!

Collaboration is the essence of succeeding with this challenge, coupled with an iterative process of design & build.

With each version they build, groups get instant feedback on what works and what doesn't.

Through play and prototyping, they instantly adapt to what's in front of them.

If you would like to know how Marshmallow Challenge can be used for leadership and team development in your organisation, please contact us today:

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