Teamwork Tower

Building a tower out of recycled materials may seem like a far cry from what we traditionally see as activities to build skills for employment. However, teamwork activities such as this one encourages group participation and show teens that working towards a shared goal is important.

Youth Will Learn

Workforce Skills: Teamwork and communication
Success Indicators: Youth will describe the value of performing as a team member

What You Need:

Time Involved: 40 minutes
Suggested Group Size: Any size
Materials Needed:
*This is a suggested list of materials. Any type of materials to build the towers can be substituted.

- Building materials such as cardboard boxes, plastic bottles, yogurt and margarine containers, cardboard cylinders (from tin foil, etc.) cups, paper plates, straws, pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, construction paper, pens, and pencils
- "Joining" materials such as scotch tape, masking tape, Duct tape, rubber bands, paper clips

Facilitator Tips:

Before the activity, you need to make a set of supplies for each group. You will need to plan for enough sets of supplies based on the size of your overall group and the number of teens that will be in each small group e.g., 30 counselors divided into groups of 5 = 6 packets needed.

The key here is to divide the supplies unevenly, but put them in a closed bag or box, so that participants cannot see that each group is getting a different set of supplies. Each group should have a lot of one supply, and only some of the other supplies.

For example:

Packet #1 -
1 roll of Masking Tape
10 Paper Cups
5 Popsicle Sticks
4 sheets of construction paper
3 cardboard boxes
4 cardboard cylinders
2 yogurt containers

Packet #2
a 12" strip of Duct tape (wound around a pen)
25 Paper Cups
5 Popsicle Sticks
8 sheets of construction paper
1 cardboard box
5 cardboard cylinders
1 yogurt container
The Activity

1. Begin by randomly dividing participants into small groups of 4-5 people and organizing the groups in different areas of the room.

2. Ask for a representative from each group to come to a separate space (center of the room or a separate room) to receive instructions and materials.

3. Pass out one set of supplies to each group representative.

4. Introduce the representatives to the activity by simply saying "This is an activity to work on teamwork, communication, and collaboration, and the goal is to build the tallest free-standing tower you can with the supplies in the bags."

5. Be careful to introduce the activity without giving too much context or answering too many questions. Again, the key here is that each group will have a different set of supplies but the facilitators should make sure this is not immediately obvious. Once it becomes more obvious, the facilitators should neither discourage or encourage collaboration and sharing.

6. The vast majority of participants, when divided into groups, will assume they should be competing against the other groups but you should not specifically say it is a competition. You will address this in the debrief questions based on the groups' choice to collaborate or compete.

7. Answer questions at this point. Try to be very general in answering questions from the representatives. If they have specific process questions, it may be helpful to say something like "You have received all the instructions I can give you. You and your group will have to figure out the rest."

8. Then announce that the representatives will return to the groups, and once they return, the facilitators will not answer any more questions. The facilitators should not answer any questions so that the groups are forced to figure out how they want to build on their own. If the groups decide they want to collaborate, the facilitators should neither encourage or discourage them (this will come up in the debrief).

9. Announce that they have 20 minutes to build, and let the building begin.
10. Some groups will spend time coming up with a detailed strategy, others will just dive right in. Some may start to notice that they do not have much tape, or that the other groups have more popsicle sticks.

11. After a few minutes of building you have a few choices. You can ask for representatives to come to the center of the room and report to the other reps one thing they are doing well and one challenge they are having. You can have everyone stop building for a moment and walk around and see other teams' progress so far.

12. Again, the facilitators should not answer any questions, and should not encourage or discourage collaboration! It is important to try to deflect... so if they ask, "How come they have so much more tape?" you might say "Sorry, I cannot really answer any questions at this point, but it looks like you are making good progress."

As they start to see that other groups have different supplies, some will respond by questioning, some will try to beg, barter, or steal supplies, and some will just resign themselves to the fact that it is not fair and will continue to focus on working with what they have. Make notes of it all, and save it for the debrief.

Because of the unequal distribution of supplies, in order to build the tallest tower possible, the groups really have to all merge and share supplies. But because you divided them into groups, and that implies competition to most people, very few participants will try to suggest that the groups collaborate or share supplies. Even if someone in the group suggests it, it is not likely that everyone will agree to it.

13. After the time limit (20 minutes) is up, instruct the teens to stop working on the towers.

14. Go around and measure all of the towers and announce a winner for the tallest tower. If the groups all decided to work together, then they all can claim the title of winner.

15. After announcing a winner, begin the debrief using the questions below.
Talk It Over

Share
• What worked well?
• What challenges did you encounter and how did you overcome them?
• Did you build the tallest tower you could? Why or why not?

Process
Add the following questions if the groups did not collaborate or share supplies:
• Did you assume that you were only supposed to collaborate with those in your small group and if so why?
• What would have been possible if you had decided to share resources with the whole group?
• Would you have had a taller tower?

Add the following questions if the groups collaborate:
• How did you come to the decision to collaborate?
• What became possible once you made the decision to share resources?
• What was challenging?

Generalize
• How does building the tower in this activity compare to your daily work or as a member of this group?

Apply
• How does this activity relate to being part of the larger company, organization, or group?
• How can we encourage collaboration, communication, and sharing among the whole group?