Class Activities

# Chapter 13: Overcoming Obstacles

## Guide to the Class Activities

Each activity is designed based on Fink’s Learning Taxonomy and is tagged with the following tags under the taxonomy’s learning and assessment structure:

1. Foundational Knowledge (F)
2. Application (A)
3. Integration (I)
4. Human Dimension (H)
5. Caring (C)
6. Learning How to Learn (L)

These activities may be used in either small-group or large-group settings, depending on class size and time available. Some may also be suitable as homework.

### Activities

### Mouse Trap Exercise (A)

There are many variations of this exercise available on the web. This one focuses on giving effective directions as a leader. You will need three mousetraps, three pencils and three blindfolds. Do not show the supplies to the class until later. Divide the class into three groups. Within each group ask one person to volunteer to be the leader and the other to volunteer to be the blind-folded follower. Once the follower is blindfolded, group members will learn what the exercise involves, while the follower remains “in the dark.” Place a set mousetrap somewhere in the room (with three different groups, the traps should be quite a distance apart from each other. The easiest location is on top of a desk, but the trap could also be placed on the floor, on top of a backpack, etc. In addition, hide a pencil somewhere in the room where the follower needs to exert some effort in seeking it. Do this for every group. Then ask leaders to give clear directions to the followers on how to spring the hidden mousetraps, *without telling them this is the goal*. First, followers need to be directed to find the pencil and how to move (e.g. “Lower your arm about a foot, reach forward six inches”). Next they are directed toward the mousetrap (*without being told that is what they are looking for*)*,* told how to hold the pencil in order to disarm the trap, and then disarm the mousetrap. After every group has completed its task, discuss which directions were easiest to understand. How is giving directions in the midst of competing voices similar to the workplace? When did group members want to jump in and give better directions than the leader, or try to protect the follower? What was the hardest part for followers? Were different leadership styles evident? Should employees ever be kept in the dark? Is it possible to give employees too many directions?

### Motivational Quotes (A, H)

Ask students to bring a selection of motivational quotes to class. These should include quotes they have found personally effective, as well as quotes they disagree with or find objectionable (e.g. those given by management to “inspire” workers). In small groups, ask individuals to share their quotes with others and why these quotes are meaningful to them. What have the words motivated them to do? Then discuss which quotes they disagree with and the reasons why.

### Motivational Speech (F, A)

This skill-building exercise focuses on creating messages that address the low motivation of hypothetical followers. Give each person in the class two slips of paper on which they should write a specific real-life example of an obstacle that hinders productivity in the workplace, e.g. “My boss is a micro-manager” or “I have a co-worker who is chronically late for work.” Collect all the examples in a small bag. For this exercise, assume the obstacles are associated with low motivation (e.g. the boss micro-manages because she feels ill-equipped to use any other leadership style)

* Option 1 – Impromptu Speech: Have a student draw three slips of paper from the bag, choose one of the examples and put the other two back in the bag. The student then goes out in the hallway and has 5 minutes to prepare a 1 minute speech for the class, from the perspective of the supervisor, motivating the worker to change his or her attitude or behavior. Preparation should focus on how to help the employee feel competent, get what he or she expects, or value what he/she does. The student should create a simple outline and speak extemporaneously, without reading his or her notes. Several students could be preparing in the hallway at a time, while others are giving their presentations in class. Generous applause should be offered for every speech. After a series of speeches, the class should discuss the challenges involved in motivating others through speech. What words, or reasons, appealed to them in the motivational speeches?

* Option 2 – Group script: In small groups, have students select an example from the bag and write a brief script for what a supervisor might say to help the employee feel competent, get what he or she expects, or value what he/she does. Scripts should be read to the class. The class then responds as the hypothetical employee about what they liked or didn’t like about the message. Which appeals were most effective?

### Group Juggling (A, I)

This activity requires several students who are able to juggle three or more balls. These students will be asked to teach the rest of the class how to juggle three balls. Each juggling teacher should be responsible for teaching at least three others how to juggle. Bring enough small balls to class for many people to juggle simultaneously. Allow 15 minutes for instruction. Afterwards debrief:

* How difficult was it to learn this task?
* What was most difficult (e.g. hand-eye coordination)?
* How can this skill be developed?
* Are there some students who think they will never learn how to juggle? Why?
* What leadership skills are required to teach juggling?
* Which teacher had the most success?
* How can leaders motivate subordinates to learn skills that they think may be beyond their capacity to learn?

### Show, Don’t Tell (A, I)

An alternative to teaching juggling to the class is having students re-read Mick Wilz’s Leadership Snapshot from chapter 5. Wilz used Legos to share with employees his mental picture of a manufacturing redesign. As homework, ask students to find a new way to teach someone a skill (like an algebraic equation or how to read music), share their mental model of a project, or explain a goal or a complex task. This activity helps students find alternative ways of communicating with audiences that may have different learning styles.

### How-To Speech (A, I, H)

This activity can be spread over several class periods. Ask students to prepare a 4-5 minute presentation that teaches the rest of the class how to do something. The task should not be something obvious like, “How to bake chocolate chip cookies” (since most of us already know how to do this) but something novel and useful, like how to set up a wiki, how to find the best credit card rate, or how to fold an origami crane. Speakers should use the following guidelines in preparing their presentations:

1. Be sure the topic is precise and the purpose of the speech is clear to the class
2. Help the audience see why this skill may be useful to them
3. Give a simple preview of the process (“This involves three steps”)
4. Make sure to give signposts throughout the speech (“Now we’re moving to step two”)
5. Offer a brief summary at the end
6. Practice giving the speech aloud, paying attention to the time allotment

After the speech, class feedback should include questions for clarification, suggestions for how to improve clarity of certain points, and recognition of specific strengths of the presentation.

### Course Timeline (A)

A way for students to practice their own organizational skills and to overcome obstacles such as unclear direction is to create a timeline for their required reading and homework in the course. This is best done early in the term, but can still be useful for a shorter time period. Example:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 | Week 6 |
| Task 1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Task 2 |  |  |  |  |  |  |

## Writing Assignments

### Sketch-noting (A, I)

Sketch-noting is described in the Class Activities from chapter 1. Making sketch notes is not about drawing, or artistry, but about making marks on paper (or a white board) to help oneself think. There is no right or wrong way to do this. Everyone will do it differently. This exercise helps students practice identifying and overcoming obstacles

Ask students to sketch out a problem they are having at school or work, that involves other people, such as how to get a promotion, how to do better on the next performance review, what college courses to take to prepare for a desired career, and so on. After identifying the problem, they can sketch in (with lines, shapes and words) all the obstacles that contribute to the problem. Do the obstacles interact or are they discreet? For each obstacle, have the student brainstorm possible solutions. These should be drawn on the sketch. Then, as a 2 x 2 grid, students should include an inset on their sketch which outlines the relative benefits of each solution for the student AND for the other party (ies) involved in this issue. Example:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Solutions that have:  High benefit to other people (Parents, employer)  Low benefit to student | Solutions that have:  High benefit to other people (Parents, employer)  High benefit to student |
| Solutions that have:  Low or less benefit to other people (Parents, employer)  Low benefit to student | Solutions that have:  Low or less benefit to other people (parents, employer)  High benefit to student |

### Leadership Coaching (A, I, H)

Using their results on the Path-Goal Styles Questionnaire, have students write a 3 page plan for how they can strengthen or improve their leadership skills in the weaker areas. First, they should assess how well their dominant styles serve them in their current occupations or roles. How will developing additional styles help them in the roles they aspire to in the future? What would they need to practice in order to strengthen the weaker areas? The improvement plan should identify weekly and monthly goals. How will growth be measured? How will they keep themselves motivated to change?

### Effective Job Descriptions (A, I, C)

This activity is designed to help students understand the importance of clear goals in the workplace. It involves job descriptions, which are often overlooked as a means of communicating the expectations and goals for positions in an organization.

Option One:

Have students form groups of 3-4 and then assign each group the task of writing a job description for one of the following positions:

* Executive secretary to the CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation
* First grade public school teacher
* Shift worker at a meat processing plant
* Municipal police officer
* Laboratory technician in a biotech research facility

Option Two:

Provide sample job descriptions for a variety of positions to the students, but first remove the job title from the description. Ask students to see if they can identify the position based on the description.

For either option, discuss as a class the implications of clearly defining and communicating the goals of positions. What are the challenges for leaders in this process?

### Looking Back (A)

As the term ends, ask the class which topic was most meaningful to them and why? When was the class most energized and engaged? What did you all do differently together in that class?

### Two or Three Birds with One Stone (F, A)

The seven types of obstacles explained in chapter 13 are not always discrete. They may well overlap in real-life settings as in the Venn diagram below. Ask students to identify a real or hypothetical situation involving two or more obstacles to goal accomplishment. These can be drawn as overlapping circles. For each obstacle, students should identify the (suspected or known) reason or cause of the obstacle, as per the example below. In the overlapping parts of the circles, how do the obstacles combine and interact? What opportunities are there in the overlapping areas to alleviate or remove two obstacles at the same time? In the example below, offering a PT employee the chance for additional training, for which he would be paid extra, could address both the low motivation obstacle and the lack of challenge obstacle.

### One Minute Paper Topics (F, A, I)

What have you learned from one of the obstacles in your life?

What is your motivation for attending college? What keeps you motivated?

Think of a leader who has helped you overcome an obstacle. How did they do this?