

The Stages of a Game: Interactive Techniques for Group Development

Games divide into 10 logical stages.

1. The offer

Games should be offered to a group, not imposed. Include a statement about why the game is being offered, but without mentioning the learning point (“This game is about leadership; you'll have a clearer idea of it once we've tried it out and discussed it.”)

At this point, raise issues about the contract or abilities/disabilities relevant to the game. Participants can then make an informed decision about whether to proceed.

2. Dividing the group

For many games, it's necessary to divide people into pairs or groups. Do so before explaining what you want them to do. If you give too many directions at once, some people won't be able to get on with the game. Methods of dividing include:

- Allow participants to group themselves
- Ask them to work with someone they've worked with the least
- Work with a neighbor
- Count off
- Place colored discs on chairs (a good way to mix cliques)
- Develop arbitrary categories (men/women, birth dates...)

All of these methods have their advantages and disadvantages.

3. The introduction

At this stage you can (usually) give the title of the game and explain the rules. The form of words used can be very important. Make sure people understand timings. Use eye contact.

4. The demonstration

Some people follow directions best by being told, others by reading, and still others by seeing something done. A good trainer will explain and then demonstrate. When finished, ask whether clarification is needed. Make eye contact with each participant as you do so.

5. Playing the game

This is the most straightforward part. The degree of your participation and your nonverbal communication will be crucial in determining the pace of the game.

6. Observing the game

Even if you are taking part, you will also be observing it with a view to giving later feedback and to even abort the game if necessary. If you are in any doubt about how a participant is coping with the activity, call a halt and deal with the matter openly.

7. Stopping the game

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Knowing when to stop is important. If you are not confident, you may end the game too early. Circle, relay, and concentric games have a natural end. Others do not.

8. Feelings

People will often wish to express how they felt about a game. It is tempting to try to deal with this at the same time as you are discussing the learning points. Experts would discourage this. In a game that's raised feelings, you may want to go around the circle and discuss them before you debrief the learning points.

9. Feedback discussion (debrief)

If timing slips, it's tempting to skimp on the discussion phase. From the learning point of view, however, the discussion is the most important part of the game. It affects the transfer of learning and ensures that the learning objectives are achieved. You should accept the learning points made by the group even if they were not the ones you had in mind in using the game. Model active listening. (This involves listening carefully to the verbal and non-verbal communication of your group and allows you to better understand the situation. It also helps create an environment of trust and mutual understanding.)

You may want to add other points or seek clarification and to move on to deeper level of discussion if necessary. If important points take a while to emerge, make a mental note of this and consider modifying your introduction of the game. It is not necessary, helpful, or even possible for you to know everything a participant has gained from the game.

10. Ending

It is important to end a game well. Common criticisms are that participants did not feel that the discussion covered all the points, or that they did not understand the reason for the game. It is your responsibility to dispose of any unfinished business before moving away from the game. You should be prepared to state why the activity was offered. It may also be necessary to deal with any emotions that have been aroused, and to ensure that issues raised have been fully explored.

If you engaged in role-playing games it is important to release participants from those roles, so they are not perceived to be in character for the remainder of the training. This can be achieved by having them respond to questions that encourage them to discuss how they are different from the role they played.

If you took the group through a reflective exercise, it is necessary to "reground" them in the here and now. This can be done by having pairs ask each other questions like "How many people are in this room," or "Name three blue items in this room," or "Name three fruits you have to peel."

"And now let's do something else" is a poor—but common—ending for a game. Acknowledge the participation of the group; thank them for playing, for contributing.

Adapted from the *Encyclopedia of Games for Trainers*, © Andy Kirby, 1992