



Part Three: The Game

Objective: Engage your team in service improvement by playing a simple game that will energise them and show them the simple rules that ensure success

Introduction

At the risk of boring you to death there is a PowerPoint presentation that goes along with the event. You don't have to use it. There are only a few slides and they don't have many words on them. If like me you like to have a crutch to help you remember where you are and act like a prompt then you can download it from the web site. It is called Balloons Inc.

As we go through the mechanics of the event in I will step you through the individual slides, simply so you can understand how the whole thing hangs together. To help you get your mind around what you need to do I would thoroughly recommend printing the presentation out (using the print notes command) as there are facilitation notes on the bottom of each slide which you can refer to. You can also scribble on your own notes and then if you are horribly organised put the whole lot in a binder for when you run your own event.

Timetable for the event

Like all good recipes there aren't any hard and fast quantities for the ingredients of the event. It all depends on who you have present, what the subject matter is, how contentious or interesting the debate becomes. You may decide to skip things and add things as you see fit. However as a starting point I suggest you take 3 hours and split the time up as follows:

00:00 to 01:00 Stage One: The balloon game

- 00:00 to 00:15 Set up and round one (slides 1 to 4)
- 00:15 to 00:25 Round two (slide 5)
- 00:25 to 00:40 Round three (slide 6)
- 00:40 to 00:50 Debrief (slide 7)
- 00:50 to 01:00 Breathing space

01:00 to 01:30 Stage Two: Feedback on Current Performance

- 01:00 to 01:05 Briefing by senior manager on business process diagram (slide 8)
- 01:05 to 01:15 Voting
- 01:15 to 01:25 Thoughts from senior manager
- 01:25 to 01:30 Breathing space

01:30 to 03:00 Stage Three: Generating Improvement Projects

- 01:30 to 01:40 Briefing (slides 9 to 11)
- 01:40 to 02:30 Idea and solution generation
- 02:30 to 03:00 Presentation to management (slide 12)

You don't have to do it like that rigidly; there is always going to be an element of suck it and see, but that is a good starting guideline.

Stage one of the Kick Start: the game

The purpose of the game is three-fold, to energise the group and also to get them to start thinking about service improvement and what they could do differently and to show what a powerful impact on employee engagement service improvement can have.

Slide 1: Balloons Inc

You will need to get everybody seated in a large room. Ideally you will want them seated around different tables and reasonably spread out. It is possible to use other layouts e.g. a U shape facing the presenter but the more spread out and random the seating plan is the better it will be.

Requirements

1. A flip chart and a handful of pens
2. A packet of balloons
3. Stop watches

What to do

The aim of this slide is simply to introduce people to the game.

Tell them that they are going to play a process improvement game and that for the next 30 minutes they work for a different organisation "Balloons Incorporated". You are the new boss, they have to pay attention to you otherwise there is a risk of instant dismissal

You need people to time the game so pick one supervisor per group of 15 or so people.

Slide 2: how we make money

At this stage you need to explain the basic premise of the new business and their role within it. Explain that you are in the market of balloon entertainment and that your company produces the world's premium balloons (spherical rubber as the Marketers call it.)

Your USP is that your balloons have an electrostatic charge applied to them, which gives them a special luminescence, this is what sets you apart from the competition.

This special charge is applied by hand, every employee adding to the charge as they bat (or pass) the balloon to each other. You can demonstrate this by passing the balloon, or hitting it at somebody. The balloons are individually charged by making sure that everybody hits every balloon once so ensuring that the precise electrostatic charge required is applied. Finally their role is one of balloon handling technicians, their job is to pass the balloons and charge them.

To be honest you can make the story as simple or complicated as you like, just as long as the audience realise that they have to pass the balloon to one another.

Slide 3: how we lose it

The key point to make now is that time is money and that the different departments (or teams) are in competition with each other to do the job. I normally pile on the pressure at this stage making the point that this business is not a charity and that there are plenty of people who would like the job of a balloon handling technician.

Hand each supervisor a stop watch to time their team's performance.

Slide 4: health and safety

The purpose of this slide is to introduce some constraints to the operation that they will have to work around. This will make them think about the problem and the solutions won't be quite so straightforward or simple. There are four constraints; I normally position them as health and safety issues. The four constraints are:

1. Everybody must remain seated. This reduces the potential of an unplanned collision with a balloon (very painful)
2. Nobody can hold the balloon. Holding a balloon could result in excessive build up of charge and an explosion.
3. Everybody must touch the balloon, but only once. They are being paid to charge the balloon but touching it more than once will result in excessive charge build up and again possible risk of explosion. Some smart mouth is bound to say "what about if they touch it twice and their friend doesn't touch it at all?" If that happens, feel free to point out that they are a smart mouth and they should just do as they are told. You are the boss after all.
4. The balloon must keep moving, if the balloon stays still it will react with the substrate it is resting on resulting in spontaneous combustion (Very expensive as people could die and you will be faced with a huge recruitment bill to back fill)

Side note

At this point you are probably thinking, there is a lot to remember, it all looks a bit complicated, what have I let myself in for? Don't forget that there are speaker notes on the presentation you can print out and scribble on (Microsoft button > Print > Print > Print What > Notes Pages)

Start round one

Now you are ready for round one. The teams will pass the balloon around so that everybody touches it. It will float / bounce haphazardly around the room and take somewhere between an eon and an age. Once the balloon has finished its rounds and everybody has touched it get the timings from each supervisor. Some of them may struggle to use the stopwatches; this will give you the opportunity to give your supervisors a suitable dressing down. I like to play the manager from hell role to the hilt.

Once you have all the timings write them down (or improvise if the timing wasn't as smooth as it might have been) so you have a record. Then ask for an honest show of hands of people who didn't touch the balloon, there are usually a couple, these balloons were not processed properly and are defective, it is worth pointing that out.

Now you can express your dissatisfaction with overall performance, it was slow, expensive and the quality achieved was appalling.

Slide 5: employee targets

The point of this part of the game is to show that a lot of management initiatives aren't appropriate, particularly if the operation isn't properly understood.

Tell the group that you have employed some management consultants and that they have shown you that the issue is that the time between touches is too long. Obviously this is easily resolved by increasing balloon velocity between touches. In reality this translates to hitting the balloon harder (you can demonstrate this by giving a balloon a really hard smack).

Now, it is worth pointing out to the audience that what you are trying to do is facilitate "cultural change" and that to do that you have improved your employee incentive scheme and added in a bonus for the biggest, hardest hitting team. This is where the box of sweets comes in.

Start round two

As with round one, get the teams to pass the balloon around so that everybody touches it but make sure you urge the teams to hit the balloon as hard as possible, the balloons motion will be far less controlled and take a lot longer.

Next you hand out the incentive to the best performing team, and praise them for a job well done and then finally get the timings from each supervisor, write them down and compare them to the previous run.

Results are unlikely to show a staggering improvement, you can become all managerial and "Express your dissatisfaction with the results", or at the least grab your box of sweets back.

Slide 6: 3rd and final round

Now it is time to get the audience to improve the balloon handling process themselves.

Tell them that this is the final round and that you have been out and about doing some benchmarking. This showed you that some operations were able to get everybody to touch the balloon in less than 5 seconds.

Tell them that the health and safety rules remain in place and that they have 5 minutes to think about how they want to improve their process. You will of course be open for consultation during those 5 minutes.

Then let the teams discuss their strategy and answer the team's questions but don't give out further information unless specifically asked for it. You want the teams to challenge their own assumptions on how things should be done.

The only thing that is important is that the constraints are followed to the letter, no more or less. So for example, everybody must be seated, but there is nothing stopping them from moving their chairs.

As the deadline approaches start to apply the pressure, then when you are ready create a bit more competition by letting each team go individually, recording their results.

A round of applause for the winning team never hurts

Plan B

Now, I have never, ever done this and not seen a significant reduction in time taken. However if you have the group from hell on your hands there is always plan B which is to run a fourth and final round after giving some tips what to do.

- Get the teams to rearrange their chairs so they are in a line. Each chair at 180 degrees to its neighbour (like a giant zip)
- Each team member should sit on a chair and then arch forward with their hands touching their knees.
- This forms a tube which will contain the balloon so it can be batted through at speed whilst all the health and safety rules are met.

Slide 7: so what did you learn?

That is the end of the game, the real point, however, is to get the audience to start thinking and debating process improvement. Ask a couple of open questions like: “What did you learn?” or “What was the point of the exercise?”

Some of the points which may be raised are:

- If there is a clear goal (or purpose) process improvement is fairly straight forward. In this case getting everybody to touch the balloon as quickly as possible. What is their purpose at work, is it as clear as the balloon game and does everybody agree?
- To really understand what is going on you need to look at the process, not just at the reports and data. The “hit it harder” exercise shows that. Can they think of any examples where improvement efforts have been misplaced? And why is that?
- Some measures are useful e.g. total time taken. Others are not e.g. speed of hitting. What measures do they have at work? Are any of them counter-productive and if they are why?
- Sometimes management incentives and targets make unhelpful measures even more counterproductive (the sweets for the hit it harder exercise). Adding an incentive to a bad measure is a really unhelpful thing to do. I bet it has never happened where you work. Worse still, people will do what you ask them to do, even if they realise it is stupid.
- The people who do the job know the job and understand it best. We have discussed the point but it plays out here.
- Fixing processes is simply a matter of fixing the things that don't work. Do things work smoothly where they are? If not get some examples of the things that could be better.

Finally ask them how they felt about the whole exercise. They are always really engaged at this point. Make the point that fixing processes and making things work well can be a really rewarding activity. (Why so many Six Sigma and Lean “gurus” are as dull as dishwater is beyond me).

If you wish you could also start a debate about “lean thinking” and waste. There is a short Pdf about waste you can down load on the web site. If you want to learn more I thoroughly recommend you have a look at the lean enterprise institute. Here is the link <http://www.lean.org/>.

One final but important point and sorry if I am teaching you to suck eggs: as the discussion progresses make sure you tie it back to every day work so that it is really clear what the parallels are. I know I have pointed that out already, but the real learning happens when people start to relate what they have been doing to their day to day activity.