

# AVOIDING CATASTROPHE: THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN TEAM EFFECTIVENESS

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## ABSTRACT

*The Avoiding CATastrophe exercise helps participants understand the importance of the individual in the success of the team. In this engaging exercise, participants use an interactive children's game, called "cat-a-pult" to explore their own role in successful team functioning. In addition to learning about personal accountability, participants also learn how clear intragroup communication is integral to team success. The exercise is of benefit to instructors and trainers working with traditional-aged college students, adult learners, and corporate trainees. It can be used to demonstrate individual accountability, effective teams, and interpersonal and intragroup communication.*

What does it take to be an effective team member? Although the saying that there is no "I" in "TEAM" is indeed true, a team cannot be truly successful unless each team member takes personal responsibility for his or her role on the team. In the exercise presented herein, participants learn the importance of individual responsibility and accountability in enhancing team effectiveness. Specifically, participants will be able to: (a) identify factors leading to team effectiveness, (b) discuss the role of the individual in the success of the team, and (c) use the "Cat-a-pult" game to demonstrate individual accountability in team effectiveness.

The exercise will be beneficial to instructors and trainers who cover the topic of team building in their course material or who require groups of students/trainees to work together as a team for an extended period of time. The exercise is useful for traditional-aged college students, adult learners, and corporate trainees.

When used as part of a team building module, the facilitator should begin by defining teams, and outlining characteristics of successful teams (see, for example, Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). The facilitator should then engage participants in a discussion about how individuals help or hinder team effectiveness. Finally, participants would engage in the game and debriefing.

When used as an ice-breaker for new teams, the facilitator should follow the same format as outlined above, and end with a discussion of implications for how the lessons from the game will enhance the team's ability to work together in the future.

## OVERVIEW OF THE EXERCISE

The children's game used in this exercise is called "Cat-a-pult," an interactive chain-reaction game distributed by HandsOnToys. The Cat-a-pult game consists of five plastic catapults and foam cats. Each participant is assigned a catapult and a cat. The object of the game is for each player to adjust his or her catapult so that, when launched, the first player's cat will land on the second player's catapult, triggering the second catapult, which launches the second cat in the direction of the third catapult, and so on. The team is successful when it is able to create a chain reaction. Each team member is responsible for setting and adjusting his or her own catapult and cannot touch the catapults of his or her team members.

## THEORETICAL GROUNDING AND RELEVANT CONSTRUCTS

The importance of the role of individual accountability in teams is supported by work on group development, self-managed work teams, and goal-setting. It is helpful to use Tuckman's model of group development (Tuckman, 1965, Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) in discussing individual accountability. First, the facilitator should introduce students/trainees to the five stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning, and briefly describe the issues facing the team at each stage. Next, the facilitator should lead the participants in a discussion of how the individual can make a difference in helping or hindering the group at each stage. For instance, in the forming stage, the team is attempting to determine its mission, how the individual team members will work together, and who is in charge. Individuals can help in this process by encouraging open communication, laying a foundation for trust, demonstrating leadership abilities, and generating discussions about the team's purpose and/or mission. An individual can hinder progress by focusing on his or her own agenda, hoarding information, and fostering mistrust. A similar process would be used to work through the other stages. In like manner, this process could be applied to other theories of group and team development and effectiveness.

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### DEBRIEFING

During the debriefing, the session facilitator should entertain questions from the participants and generate discussion with questions such as:

1. How can an individual encourage team effectiveness?
2. How did team members encourage their team members during the exercise?
3. How did “expertise” affect the outcome?
4. If an individual does not/can not learn his or her job, how does that affect the team?
5. What would have made the team more effective?
6. What hindered team effectiveness?
7. What lessons can you take away from this exercise?

### TARGETED NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

The exercise can be conducted with 5 to 20 active participants. More are welcome as observers.

### TIME REQUIRED

Ideally, the exercise should be allotted 60 minutes. The following timeline is proposed:

1. Introduction and overview of the relevant constructs (e.g. team building, conflict resolution): 15 minutes
2. Experiencing the exercise: 20 minutes
3. Debrief and discussion: 25 minutes

The session could be conducted in 30 minutes, if necessary, or expanded to 90 minutes, which would allow more opportunity for more rounds of the game and a more extensive debriefing.

### MATERIALS REQUIRED

The facilitator will need a catapult and cat for each active participant. Each Cat-a-pult game includes materials for five players. To order the Cat-a-pult game, visit HandsOnToys at <http://www.handsontoy.com>. (NOTE: The presenter is not affiliated with the game, its creator, or the distributor.)

### ROOM SET-UP

Participants should be seated at round tables, facing each other, with five to six chairs per table. Alternatively, the session could take place in a large, open room with no furniture, and could sit on the floor for the game.

### PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS/OUTCOMES OF THE ACTIVITY

Students/trainees will develop a better understanding of the importance of individual accountability in team functioning. They will also learn the value of developing intrateam communication skills for improving team success.

Past participants have commented that they enjoyed the

game and also learned about the importance of team work. In addition to being valuable in discussing teams, the game may also be applied to the topics of communication, leadership, and conflict resolution.

### REFERENCES

- Katenbach, J. R., & Smith, D. K. (1993). *The wisdom of teams: Creating the high-performance organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 6, 384-399.
- Tuckman, B. W., & Jensen, M. A. C. (1977). Stages of small-group development revisited. *Group and Organization Studies*, 12, 419-427.