

# “SYMBOLS”<sup>1</sup>

## Instructor’s Guide

### 1. Rationale for the Exercise

- This exercise can be used to illustrate several phenomena of relevance to organizational change, particularly in regard to communication. This is discussed in more detail in the Debrief section below.
- This exercise has been successfully used with a wide range of participants including undergraduate and postgraduate students, and executives.
- The task has occasionally been accomplished in less than ten minutes (by experienced managers) but more commonly it takes 20-30 minutes. If the task is going to be accomplished, it will almost always be done within 40 minutes. If the task is not achieved within this time, there is a good chance that additional time will take the teams further away from (rather than closer to) successful completion (for reasons discussed below). In most instances it is optimal to call the exercise to a halt after about 40 minutes.
- Regardless of whether the task is achieved or not, the dynamics of what occurred during the exercise provide a good basis for discussion. None-the-less, there always seems to be more to discuss if achievement of the task has been a bit of a struggle (or if it has not been achieved).

### 2. Setting-up the Exercise

- Divide the class into five groups (“teams”).
- Optional: allocate some participants to the role of observers (often useful in large classes as an alternative to having larger teams).
- Because the exercise involves both intra-team and inter-team dynamics, it is most effective where the total number of participants is below 50. Above this, team size makes effective intra-team discussion difficult to achieve.
- Physically separate the teams such that they cannot hear each other.
- Give each team its respective General Instructions sheet. Emphasise the importance of the rules.

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<sup>1</sup> This exercise has been available for decades. We are not the designers of this exercise but are unaware of the original source. We would be very pleased to know the identity of the authors so that the exercise can be correctly attributed. The Instructor’s Guide has been authored by us and reflects our collective experience of using this exercise with over 1000 students and executives.

### **3. Getting Underway**

- Take note of the start time.
- As Instructor you also have the role of Courier. In the early stage of the exercise, groups will have to work out the location of the team(s) with whom they are able to exchange notes. Therefore, the first time that you are asked to deliver a note to a named team (e.g., “Take this to Team C”), ask the sender to identify the physical location (i.e., like any courier you need to be given a physical location, not just a company name).
- If the identified location is inhabited by a team with which the sender can exchange notes, then deliver as requested. If not, tell the sender you can't deliver it. If queried, tell the (would-be) sender that you're not allowed to make that delivery. If the sender team has understood the instructions it will soon realise that it must be asking the courier to make a delivery which is in conflict with the rule as to which team can send notes to which. By a process of elimination the sender can soon identify the location of the team(s) with which it can exchange notes.

### **4. Completion**

- As soon as Team A tells you the right answer the game is over.
- Take note of the completion time.
- Inform all teams that the exercise has been completed.
- Alternative completion option: as noted above, we recommend that in most instances it is optimal to call the exercise to a halt after about 40 minutes even if the task has not been accomplished.

### **5. Debrief**

- Start by asking each team in turn what they thought was the purpose of the game. NB: begin with the teams at the bottom of the hierarchy, i.e., Groups C, D, E.
- Even where A has solved the problem, it is very common for the other teams to be unaware of the purpose of the activity. When this has occurred it is sometimes very confronting for Team A members. Some individuals (particularly executives) who consider themselves to be consultative can be quite taken aback when they realise that they have been part of a team which has managed by issuing directives.

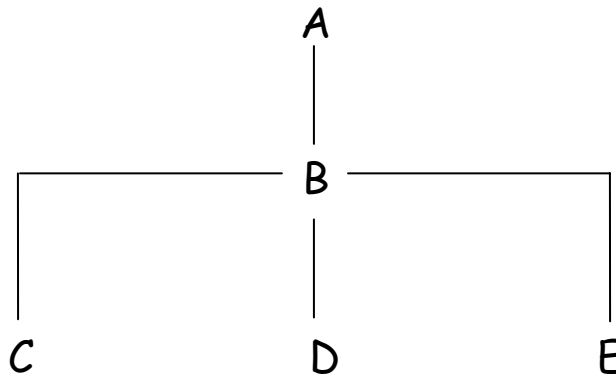
- If the task has been achieved - but some teams are unaware of the purpose of the activity in which they were engaged - it is often quite instructive to ask members of the latter how pleased they are that the organization has achieved the task. It is common for the members of these teams to express little satisfaction at the outcome. Their reaction often highlights the contrast between the satisfaction of the “top management team” (Team A) at having accomplished the task and the lack of emotional buy-in of the others. Not knowing the purpose of the task in which they are involved seems to take away a lot of the satisfaction at its completion.
- Draw participants’ attention to the apparent simplicity of the task. One way to do this is to ask someone from Team A to read the task specification on their instruction page. This reinforces the point that if the task was not accomplished (or took considerable time to accomplish) this was not due to anything innately complex in the task.
- If some participants acted as observers, invite them to comment on any of the behaviour/comments that they observed/heard. Observers often report behavior/comments that produce “laughter of recognition” from the participants/teams concerned.
- If the task has not been clearly communicated, teams will often construct their own meaning for the activity in which they are engaged. One common form that this takes is for one or more teams to conclude that it is a competitive activity. This can have unfortunate implications for task achievement. We’ve seen teams which have refused to provide requested information unless the “requesting team” first provides some information to them. We’ve also seen teams intentionally provide incorrect information to make it less likely that another team will “win.” (“We don’t know the purpose of the exercise, but we’re not going to come last!”). Probe teams to see whether any such responses have occurred. If so, ask why. Where these (or similar) responses have occurred it can be an effective way of making the point that people don’t seem to like operating in a “meaning vacuum” and in such a situation will often fill the vacuum by attributing a meaning to the activity in which they are involved.
- Give participants the opportunity to make further comment on their experience before you provide your summary comments.

Richard Dunford and Ian Palmer  
August 2006.

## "SYMBOLS"

### General Instructions - Team A

The structure of your organization is:



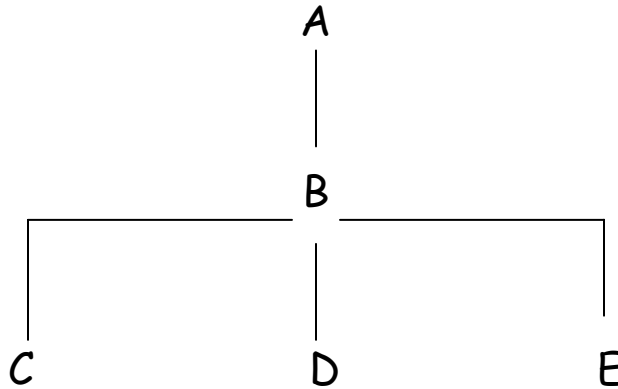
#### Rules

- Team B reports to you; three teams (C, D, E) report to Team B
- Teams A and B may exchange notes
- Teams C, D and E may exchange notes with Team B only
- Notes must be exchanged via the courier (the instructor)
- No other communication is permitted
- You must not give or show your instruction sheet to any other team
- If you have any questions about process, or need the courier's services, raise your hand.
- The instructor/courier will not identify the teams
- Each team has five symbols printed on its instruction sheet. There are a total of six symbols used in the exercise. Your job is to find out which of the six symbols is held in common.
- When you have determined the common symbol raise your hand. (Do not call out the answer)

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# General Instructions -Team B

The structure of your organization is:



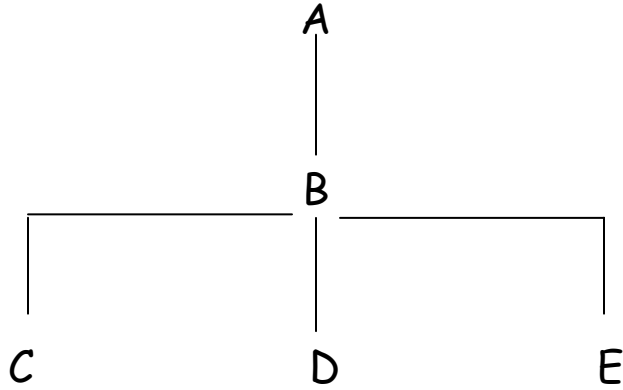
## Rules

- Teams A and B may exchange notes
- Teams C, D and E may exchange notes with Team B only
- Notes must be exchanged via the courier (the instructor)
- No other communication is permitted
- You must not give or show your instruction sheet to any other team
- If you have any questions about process, or need the courier's services, raise your hand
- The instructor/courier will not identify the teams

$$\Omega \div \Psi = 6$$

# General Instructions - Team C

The structure of your organization is:



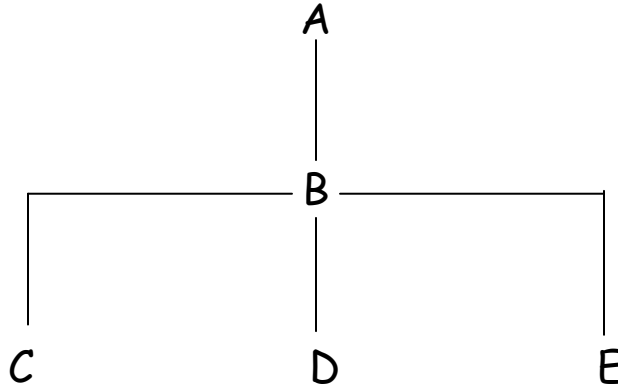
## Rules

- Teams A and B may exchange notes
- Teams C, D and E may exchange notes with Team B only
- Notes must be exchanged via the courier (the instructor)
- No other communication is permitted
- You must not give or show your instruction sheet to any other team
- If you have any questions about process, or need the courier's services, raise your hand.
- The instructor/courier will not identify the teams

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# General Instructions -Team D

The structure of your organization is:



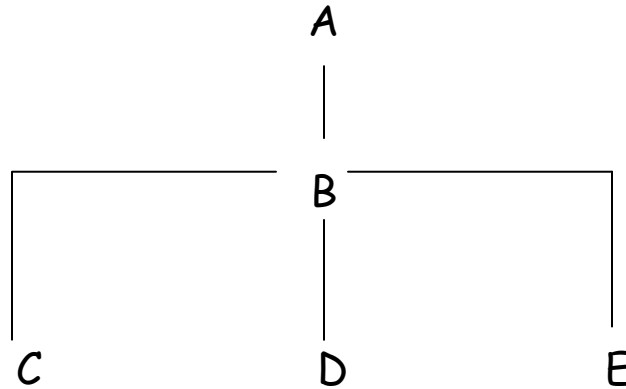
## Rules

- Teams A and B may exchange notes
- Teams C, D and E may exchange notes with Team B only
- Notes must be exchanged via the courier (the instructor)
- No other communication is permitted
- You must not give or show your instruction sheet to any other team
- If you have any questions about process, or need the courier's services, raise your hand.
- The instructor/courier will not identify the teams

$$\Psi \div 6 = \beta$$

# General Instructions - Team E

The structure of your organization is:



## Rules

- Teams A and B may exchange notes
- Teams C, D and E may exchange notes with Team B only
- Notes must be exchanged via the courier (the instructor)
- No other communication is permitted
- You must not give or show your instruction sheet to any other team
- If you have any questions about process, or need the courier's services, raise your hand.
- The instructor/courier will not identify the teams
- The instructor/courier cannot deliver notes between teams that are not allowed to exchange notes.

$$\beta \div 6 = \Omega$$