

**BROKEN SQUARES: AN EXERCISE DESIGNED TO DEMONSTRATE THE SHIFT FROM
INDIVIDUAL TO COOPERATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING**
PRESENTATION AT THE SPECIAL WORKSHOP SESSION OF THE SECOND ANNUAL LEGAL
EDUCATOR'S COLLOQUIUM, APRIL 28, 2001
AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION SECTION OF DISPUTE RESOLUTION
METRO WASHINGTON, D.C.
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"Broken Squares" is an exercise that develops the perspective of the lawyer as problem-solver. This exercise requires participants to analyze aspects of cooperative problem solving in group settings. I also use this exercise to discuss behaviors and attitudes that promote or detract from effective group problem-solving activity. For a complete set of instructions for the manufacture and the conducting of "Broken Squares" by the original author and subsequent authorized editors /adopters, see information below.

The task for each group in "Broken Squares" is to form five squares of equal size. The instructor should emphasize and repeat this goal. "Broken Squares" involves groups of six participants each. There are five participants and one observer/judge in each group. Each of the five participants is given a set of cardboard pieces to be used for forming squares. The group has twelve minutes to solve the problem. There are rules for all participants that prohibit any communication other than a non-invasive, non-verbal offer. Any other communication results in ten-second penalties added to the group's time for solving the problem. The exercise is introduced with both instructor explanations and written instructions. The instructor should also read out loud the written instructions and entertain any questions before starting the exercise. Each group requires table space in order for the group to observe each other's pieces of the broken squares. The entire exercise, including debriefing, takes approximately no less than forty-five minutes. When possible, I prefer more thorough participant debriefing lasting another thirty to forty-five minutes depending upon the total number of participants.

I begin the exercise with a discussion of cooperative problem solving both in lawyering and mediation. I also discuss the importance of reevaluating potential solutions in group decision-making. When training law students and lawyers, I discuss the relevance of rethinking solutions as part of the expanded role of lawyers and the broader range of skills increasingly expected from lawyers. I highlight the process goals stated by the author and editors of "Broken Squares" which are:

Each person should understand what the overall problem is.

Each person should understand how s/he contributes towards the solution.

Each person should be aware of the potential contributions of the others.

Each person should recognize the difficulties of others in order to aid them in making their maximum contribution.

Groups that pay attention to their own problem-solving process are more likely to be effective than groups that do not.

During the exercise, the instructor should keep time and keep track of the penalties on a large blackboard or a large piece of newsprint so that afterwards all groups can see all the group scores. The observers/judges should be calling out penalties for the instructor and keeping time of their respective group. As you stop the exercise after 12 minutes, you should convene the large group discussion. You should be prepared for /anticipate legitimate remarks that the communication rules are limiting and artificial. I always acknowledge these reservations and indicate that the exercise is designed to demonstrate certain issues for discussion and is thus limited in its construction. I try to take such observations and tie them back into what the exercise illustrates regarding individualistic versus group problem-solving and the necessity of rethinking individual solutions. The attached complete set of instructions give you some alternative methods of conducting the exercise which you may find less confining and more effective.

As an introduction to the debriefing, I indicate that the average time for a solution by U.S. workers is 6 minutes and 48 seconds. I then indicate the average time for a solution by Japanese workers is 2 minutes, 56 seconds. I then state that an average US group will spend approximately three minutes in a competitive struggle before someone breaks up a completed square and commences collaborative behavior. The problem is then usually solved in another 3-4 minutes.

Some groups fail to solve the problem within the twelve minute time limit and also may have additional penalty seconds imposed. The discussion from such groups is often insightful about how the task was interpreted. The instructor should be careful to avoid giving the sense of failure to any group performance. Rather, I emphasize that success comes from the lessons learned from the exercise and that we often benefit the most from the comments from groups that did not achieve the goal of the exercise.

Debriefing this exercise often yields very rich discussion about the need to break up one's own square several times in order to achieve the group goal or to achieve the best result in these circumstances. This discussion serves as a good metaphor for the challenges of engaging in creative problem solving with others and staying open to rethinking solutions. Often, participants reflect on the difference between individualistic versus collaborative approaches to working with others. These observations are significant in discussions about the professional role of a lawyer. In my mediation/negotiation instruction and training, I use this exercise to set the tone for the remainder of the semester or workshop. I continually refer to the necessity of "breaking up our squares" in discussing subsequent material later in the seminar or workshop.

I hope you enjoy incorporating "Broken Squares" into your instruction and training. I hope you experience rewarding debriefing sessions off of this exercise with your participants. Please feel free to contact me directly for further guidance and information. I would enjoy hearing from you about your particular experience with "Broken Squares".

Group instructions and Observer Instructions modified with permission by Blaine Hartford adapted by J. William Pfeiffer in A Handbook of Structured Experiences for Human Relations Training, (Volume I, Revised) University Associates, Inc. with permission from Alex Bavelas, Communication Patterns in Task-Oriented Groups, Journal of the Acoustical Society of America, 1950, 22,225-230.