



team-building exercises
THREE PATHS TO STRONGER TEAMS

SET UP A TEAM CHALLENGE

Competitions can offer a fun diversion from day-to-day business tasks or enliven a routine team meeting. They also provide opportunities to discover strengths and build closer, more trusting relationships among colleagues. Here are team challenges to foster communication, cooperation and creativity – and enable better problem-solving.

When setting up teams for these activities, aim to make each team diverse by mixing together veterinarians, technicians, assistants and receptionists. Also consider team dynamics in deciding whom to put together. Good friends might enjoy being on the same team, but your practice might see more benefit if you combine people who don't already know each other well.

SCAVENGER HUNT

This twist on a familiar game can help your team expand its creativity and build efficiency in problem-solving.

Group size: Teams of approximately equal size with at least 2 members per team.

Steps:

- Identify 10 items for staff members to collect or identify.
For example:
 - Picture of sweetest patient
 - Funniest joke (write it down)
 - Best suggestion for making a client's day
 - Name of team member who always puts others first
 - Name of team member who is always on time
 - Name of team member who always makes you smile
 - Cleanest towel in the practice
 - Picture of cleanest exam room
- Identify a judging team (e.g., one veterinarian, one technician, one kennel staff, one receptionist) who will select the winners based on both number and quality of items collected.
- Explain the ground rules, and distribute lists of the scavenger hunt items.
- Give the teams a set amount of time (e.g., 30 minutes) to identify as many items as possible.
- Ring a bell when time is up. Invite participants to enjoy a treat or relax together listening to music or playing a game while the judging takes place. Alternatively, have the teams judge submissions and each choose a winner – but they can't select their own!

Team debrief:

- How did your group work together as a team – For example, did you divide the list of items or all work together on each one? Would you take the same approach the next time? Why or why not?
- What item or items did you most enjoy finding? Why?

TOWER COMPETITION

This activity uses creativity, compromise, and group decision-making to find one of many possible solutions to a problem. Here are two variations.

Group size: 2-10

STRAW TOWER

Steps:

- Provide the group with a pile of drinking straws, paper clips, pipe cleaners, scissors, and a ball of string.
- Inform the group that their task is to use these materials to build a tower that is as tall as possible without having it fall over.
- Give the group a time limit to complete the task. For added incentive create more than one team, and challenge them to build the tallest tower.

PAPER TOWER

Steps:

- Give the group a stack of standard letter-sized paper. (Copy machine paper is ideal; the paper can be recycled or scrap paper provided it doesn't contain any sensitive information.)
- Instruct the group that they must build the tallest tower they can using only the paper given to them. No tape, gum, paper clips, etc. are allowed. (You can limit the group to 15 sheets of paper, or give them whatever you can round up).
- You can have your team work together in a single group, or divide into smaller teams to further the sense of competition.

Hint: There are many ways to build a paper tower, but one of the better ways is to fold each piece into three sections like a triangle - then open the paper slightly so that it isn't a flat triangle, but one that can stand upright on its own. Then stack each triangle on top of the next or place a horizontal piece of paper in between each. If the area is exposed to wind or drafts, it will make the task more challenging.

Team debrief:

- Did everyone agree on how the tower should be built? If not, how did you make a decision?
- What are some good ways for a group of people to make decisions together?
- Why is it important to be able to work with others and make decisions as a group?

CUP STACK

This task helps develop persistence, social skills and camaraderie by having team members work together on an activity that can sometimes take numerous tries to complete.

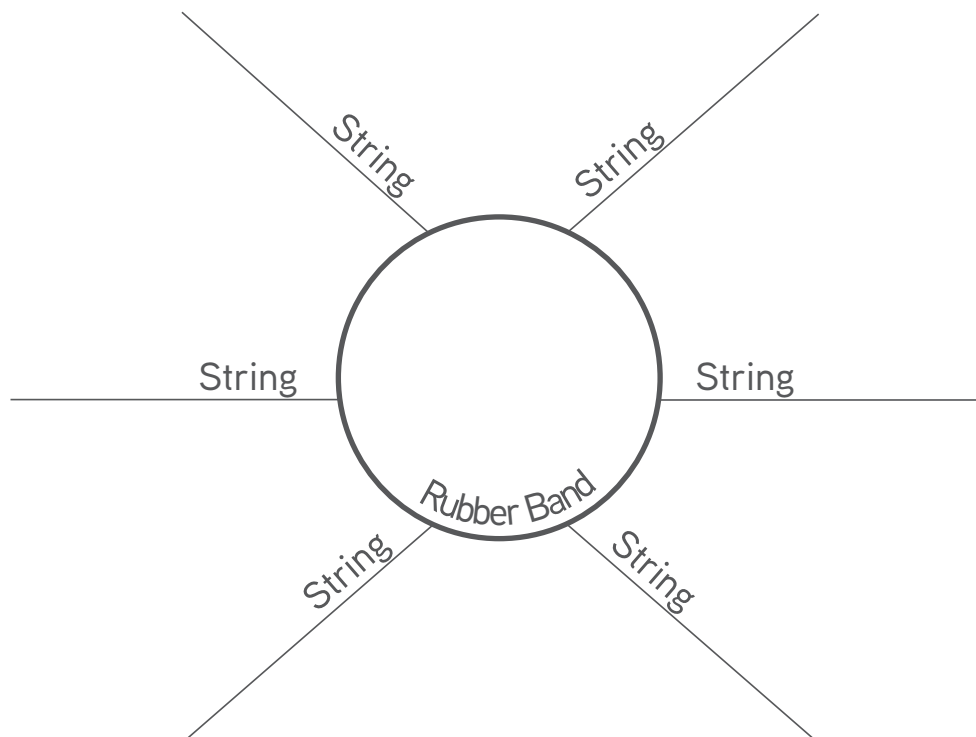
Group size: 3 or more (best with groups of 6)

Steps:

- Prior to the activity: For each group that will be participating, put together a simple gadget consisting of six lengths of string tied to a rubber band. (See illustration.)
 - The rubber band should be the right size to fit around the paper or plastic cups you will use in this activity.
 - Each piece of string should be the same length, approximately 2-3 feet long.
 - The six lengths of string should be spaced equally around the rubber band so that it looks like a sun with six rays going out in all directions.
- Divide participants into groups, instructing them that they will be trying to build a pyramid of paper/plastic cups without touching the cups directly.
- Give each group a stack of 10 cups of equal size, and one of the rubber band/string implements you prepared in advance. Spread out the cups, upside down, on the table.
- Challenge each group to build a pyramid of four cups on the bottom, three on the next row, then two, and finally one on top. Group members may not touch the cups, even if a cup falls on the floor. Each person should hold onto one of the strings attached to the rubber band, and the group should use this device to pick up and manipulate the cups, pulling the rubber band apart and then bringing it back together over the cups – without actually touching the cups. (See illustration.) If there are fewer than six people on any given team, some team members may have to hold more than one string.

Team debrief:

- Was anyone frustrated at all during this activity? If so how was it handled?
- Why was teamwork so important for this activity?



GUM DROP STRUCTURE

This exercise explores team dynamics, and tests communication and leadership skills. This exercise was created by the Veterinary Leadership Institute, parent organization of the Veterinary Leadership Experience (VLE).

Group size: 8-16

Steps:

- Out of sight of the participants, prepare for the exercise by creating a structure of gumdrops and colored toothpicks (or various lengths of dry spaghetti noodles). This is the structure the participants will need to reconstruct in their groups, and it should not be so complex that the teams will not be able to complete the activity comfortably in the allotted timeframe (35-40 minutes). NOTE: Participants should have no advance indication of what supplies are being used or what the model will look like.
- Divide the group into multiple teams. The number on each team can vary depending on your group size but should be between 8-16 participants (one or more seers, 3 or more runners, and 4 or more builders).
- Explain to participants that in a separate room is a structure made of gumdrops and colored toothpicks (or spaghetti noodles), which they will be attempting to replicate. The seers will be the only team members allowed to see the structure. Seers will have as much time as they would like to look it over, and may come back as many times as necessary. Their task is to communicate what the structure looks like to the runners, who will in turn carry the seers' messages to the builders.
- Ground rules:
 - Runners are not allowed to see either the model or the project on which the builders are working.
 - Runners may ask questions of the seers, and the seers can talk to the runners.
 - Only runners, not seers, may talk to the builders, and only one runner at a time may be present with the builders.
 - Builders will be in a separate room where they cannot see the structure or the seer, or observe interchanges between the runners and seers.
 - Once runners have received instruction from the seer, they will proceed to the builders. They may relay the instructions to the builders using words and non-verbal communication excluding phone pictures, drawings or constructed models using any materials.
 - Builders may ask questions of the runners, who may relay the questions back to the seers.
- Allow 35-40 minutes for the activity. At the end of the allotted time, bring everyone together as one large group in the builders' room, and bring in the original structure to compare with each of the new creations. How close did everyone get?

Team debrief:

- What was difficult about the process?
- What was most challenging about each of the three roles - seer, runner and builder?
- Did this teach you anything about communication that can carry over into the teams' day-to-day work?

TEAM CODE

For this exercise, small groups will work with easel paper and markers to define a team code that upholds the values and behaviors that each member sees as necessary to your workplace's healthy functioning. This exercise was created by the Veterinary Leadership Institute, parent organization of the Veterinary Leadership Experience (VLE).

Group Size: 3- to 4-member teams

Steps:

- Ask the participants:
 - What are the attitudes/behaviors we want to encourage and strengthen in our team – and for which we're willing to hold ourselves and others accountable?
 - What attitudes/behaviors do we not want in our team?
- Challenge each group to create a poster that represents their team code, including words and visual elements (e.g., pictures, symbols) that represent what is important to the group. They will draw an outline or come up with a symbolic picture that represents the group's sense of identity. Inside the boundaries of the drawing they are to write the values or behaviors they want to encourage and model. Outside the boundaries of the drawing, they are to write adjectives, values, or behaviors they wish to keep outside of the team.
- Advise the groups there must be consensus on each item included in the poster.
- Encourage all members to literally have a hand in creating the poster.
- Ask the group to isolate the top three words inside and outside the outline.
- Discuss each team's posters, identifying both common elements and items that are unique in each.

Variation: Rather than working in small groups, you can challenge your entire team to define a team code together for your whole staff. Engage all team members as one group to identify the behaviors they would like all team members to model.

Team debrief:

- How did you feel about the requirement to reach consensus on every item? How did it affect your group's dynamics?
- What elements from your own team's poster or another group's poster are you willing to commit to adopting as your own behaviors and hold yourself accountable for moving forward?

SUPERCARGE TEAM MEETINGS

Meetings are a mainstay of any work environment. In addition to using them to share information among team members, you also can include activities to help build team camaraderie and cooperation, and reinforce the bonds among co-workers. Here are some ways to keep your team meetings from turning stale by turning them into team-building opportunities:

- Rethink what constitutes a meeting, and consider alternative formats. Tap your team to help formulate meeting strategy: As a group, define how meetings will be conducted; or ask for volunteers to lead fun activities at future meetings.
- Adapt the “Team Code” challenge described above to define a team code for your entire staff. Engage all team members as one group to define the behaviors they would like everyone on the workplace team to model.
- Encourage team participation and discussion during team meetings. Agenda topics to do this could include prominent achievements (during the week/month or on a particular case or project), and how they were accomplished by the team.
- Getting to know each other better is part of building stronger teams. Kick off meetings with a quick, fun activity, such as inviting each person to describe the best thing that happened that day/week. Or highlight a different team member at each meeting, asking them in advance to come ready to talk about their life outside work: share hobbies, favorite books or foods; highlights of a recent vacation; or tell something about themselves that will surprise their co-workers. Build this “sharing” activity in as a regular feature of your team meetings so you can be sure to spotlight all team members over time.
- Use creative approaches to elicit insights into team members’ personalities. For example:
 - Ask participants to name the song that would be their “walk-in music.” (You can use the songs to create a background-music playlist for future meetings.)
 - Have each team member identify a superhero they would choose to be, and explain why they would value the powers of that persona.
- Ask each team member to write down one sincere compliment about each person in the room and then share each observation with the person to whom it applies.
- Take time at an annual retreat to talk about professional and personal development goals that might be met through workshops, exercises or role-playing.
- Engage your team in brainstorming ideas to help move your practice toward meeting key goals. Remember that with brainstorming, no idea is off limits.
- Encourage the team to have “walk-and-talk meetings” that combine exercise with work-related discussions when possible. Not every meeting is appropriate for a walking agenda, but the change of scenery and format can lead to informal conversations that help develop camaraderie.
- Ask team members who attend a veterinary conference to bring back at least one team-building idea to present to the entire team for implementation.
- Bring in a facilitator to conduct a “communication styles” workshop with takeaways on how to communicate better with team members, family, friends, and clients.
- Partner with a veterinary manufacturer or distributor representative to tap into their ideas and resources. Is there an area representative who can present a “lunch and learn” session on a topic that would interest your team?

CULTIVATE A GREAT WORKPLACE CULTURE

Generate enthusiasm by showing appreciation and organizing fun activities that can benefit the team - and ultimately the practice. Recognize a job well done. Reward the group's efforts. Show you care about your employees. Here are some ideas how:

- Celebrate team successes with prizes. (See list below for some suggestions.)
- Feature a team (or an individual) on the practice bulletin board, through social media, or in a newsletter. Be sure everyone on your team gets highlighted over time. Whenever you want to post about individual team members on social media, make sure in advance that the team member involved is comfortable with you doing so.
- Show support for volunteerism by organizing a group volunteer activity for a local charity. Give team members a half or full day of paid time off to volunteer for the cause together.
- Promote wellbeing through a healthy initiative:
 - Host a team "steps" challenge that promotes exercise and awards a prize to the winner(s).
 - Offer a weekly or monthly healthy snack. Place a nutritious food in the break room along with some general information on its benefits.
 - Create a "Wheel of Wellbeing" calendar for display in the break room, or to be sent as calendar invites.
- Celebrate holidays – official or otherwise: Select a day or two each month and have fun with it – through treats, dressing up, a potluck, or whatever inspiration dictates! Organize workplace games to coincide with the Super Bowl, the Olympics, or the Oscars.
- Hold a quarterly team lunch to celebrate successes, birthdays, or anniversaries.
- Have a baking or chili-making contest – and then share stories and recipes afterward!

OFFERING PRIZES?

It's not necessary to offer prizes in conjunction with any of these team activities.

But if you want to do so, here are some creative ideas:

- Vacation day
- Movie passes
- Lottery tickets
- Pet toys
- Plant or floral bouquet
- Gift cards (restaurants, coffee shops, gas/fuel)
- Donation to a charity of the winner's choice
- Branded gear: water bottle, thermos, fleece, etc.
- Bubbles or other fun toys
- Lunch catered in the office or at local restaurant (winner's choice)
- Candy bars or healthy snacks
- Sidewalk chalk and 30 minutes off to create a mural on the clinic's sidewalk
- Traveling trophy with names of team members that can be reused in future events
- Post picture of winning team/individual on practice bulletin board, or on social media channels if the winning team members are comfortable with you doing so