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Tips for trainers: marching soldiers

I do not take any credit for this game; I picked it up from a Filipino friend who had for many years worked in popular theatre. It has not failed to disappoint on the many occasions I have used it in various countries and contexts.

The scenario of this game is a small poor village. The village is under threat from a group of approaching soldiers and the villagers have to prevent the soldiers from achieving their objective of crossing the perimeter and entering the confines of the village.

Time required (20-30 minutes)

• Objectives

- Primarily an ice-breaker; and,
- To stress the need for team-work, good communication and research skills, especially 'lateral' thinking.

• Materials

- Four markers to indicate the edges of the village; and,
- A drum or equivalent e.g. a plate and spoon or anything that can make a good rhythmic beat.

• Steps

1. A large space is required preferably out of doors.
2. A minimum of twenty people are needed to run this game effectively.
3. Before the session starts and without anyone else noticing, take one person aside to be a 'drummer'. Tell the person that he or she directs the speed of the marching soldiers through the beat of the drum. If the drum beat speeds up, the marching speeds up; if it slows, the

marching slows; if it stops, the soldiers stop. The drummer can vary the speed of the beat at his/her discretion. The drummer stands or sits inconspicuously to one side and does not communicate with the rest of the players.

4. Split the remaining people into two equal sized groups: one group is the villagers, the other the soldiers. Explain the scenario of the game to the two groups.
5. Mark the perimeters of the village by placing the markers in a square so that the villagers *cannot* hand to hand protect the total perimeter.
6. In defending the perimeter, the villagers are not able to use anything except their bodies. Please explain that this is *not* a game of violence and that participants are not allowed to move the perimeters of the village.
7. Take the soldiers to one side and explain to them their objective is to cross the perimeter of the village and that they must approach the village (initially in a line rather than a column) marching at the speed of the drum beat, on which they must concentrate.
8. Signal to the drummer to start the game.
9. Reminder: The soldiers may need to be reminded to follow the beat of the drum throughout the game.
10. If the villagers or soldiers break the rules, stop the game and re-group the two groups. As soon as one soldier has penetrated the village, it is considered a 'win' and the game can be re-started by regrouping the participants. The villagers on the other hand need to be questioned, challenged and stimulated into thinking. Let them work out the situation; your role as facilitator is to be provocative!¹

¹ The game finishes when the villagers realise that to stop the soldiers entering the village all they have to do is stop the drummer!

11. Run the game up to 3-4 times (the game is rarely completed in the first round). If the villagers have not solved the game, introduce the drummer and let the person explain their role.
12. At the end of the game (whether the villagers win or not) try to stimulate a discussion on what happened in the village, why and what insights they have learnt.

• Comments

In my experience, the villagers can develop very sophisticated 'solutions' to the game from kidnapping soldiers, giving bribes to offering peace talks. Sadly there is only one solution, and thus as a facilitator you can have fun in taunting the group when they fail in each round. Have fun!

Source: Paul Mincher, Resource Centre for Participatory Learning and Action, IIED.

