

**TIP #5 – MARCH 2006 – ACID RIVER ACTIVITY
CONTRIBUTED BY CHARLES ST. JOHN OF THE RESULTS GROUP, INC.**

I use “Acid River” as an outdoor opening activity to warm up the group and as a foreshadowing of our work on The Five Practices. It also requires people to get into each others personal space which helps open them up and begin to connect with each other more quickly.

This activity can be used to stimulate insights around problem solving, strategy, challenging, collaboration, teamwork, communication, mutual support, encouragement, and celebration.

Materials/Set-up:

- Manila folders. One per person.
- Two lengths of rope or tape to mark off opposite banks of the river. The rope or tape needs to be 10’–20’ in length depending on group size (brightly colored climbing rope works great) – needs to be long enough for everyone to stand shoulder to shoulder along its length. Lay the two lengths of rope parallel to each other on the ground. By doing so you will have created a “river” between the two ropes and “banks” on the outside of the ropes.
- The distance from bank to bank should be between 25’-40’ depending on available space and group size.

Safety Considerations:

- If the stepping stones used are manila folders and the activity is being conducted on a cement or asphalt surface, caution the group to be careful as the paper may tear or slip when used.
- This exercise has a very low injury risk factor and should be easy for most everyone to do. However, maintaining balance may be difficult for some participants so they should be encouraged to literally support each other during the exercise so no one is injured.
- Special arrangements should be made for those who have a physical challenge, i.e., wearing a cast, in a wheelchair, etc.

Instructions:

Gather everyone on one bank of the river and have them divide into teams of 4-8 people each. Give everyone a “stepping stone” – a manila folder. Tell them that the objective of the exercise is to get everyone in the group safely across the imaginary river without anyone falling in. The river, of course, is full of hungry competitors, piranha, difficulties, and that the resources the company needs to survive are on the other side of the river. In order to insure the company’s continued success, a creative solution must be generated that will get everyone across the river and have everyone step onto the opposite bank at the same time.

Tell them that they are individual teams but they are all part of one larger organization. Describe the rules of the activity (see below) and answer any of their questions. Teams

have 5 minutes to brainstorm possible strategies for crossing the river. They may practice, if they choose, on the starting bank but not in the river (between the two rope/tape lines). Call time after 5 minutes of planning, bring the teams to the starting bank, remind them of their objective (to all step onto the opposite bank in unison), tell them they have 15 minutes to reach the other side and start them on their way.

Rules:

- You must keep possession of your stepping stone. You may not hand it to anyone else. However, others may step on your stone in passing.
- You can rest only on your own stone.
- No “skooching” – sliding your rock along the ground.
- If anyone falls in the river (steps off a stone), everyone in the entire group must go back to the starting river bank and begin again.
- Everyone must step onto the opposite bank at the same time.

Debrief:

Some thoughts for your debrief:

- Despite having given clear instructions, and even having repeated them more than once, I frequently find that they interpret the instruction that everyone must step onto the bank at the same time to mean everyone in their small team. This sets up a good discussion about clarifying instructions and understanding what your deliverables are.
- The set up into small teams often triggers the notion that they are competing with each other so they don’t collaborate in developing a strategy or while on the river. The instructions don’t suggest anything about competition. In fact, the goal of having everyone step onto the bank in unison means that there is no point in racing across the river, you’ll only have to wait there for everyone else to arrive before the task can be completed. This sets up an exploration of collaboration vs. competition and might they have performed better had they shared their strategies and supported each other in the execution.
- I ask them how this activity is a metaphor for the work we will be doing in the workshop, such as being open and willing to share ideas, take some risks and to support each other.
- I also foreshadow our work with The Five Practices by asking whether they had any shared standards of performance like making sure everybody got across the river safely (Model the Way), did they have a clear, shared goal (Inspire a Shared Vision), did they think about altering or changing the rules of the activity (Challenge the Process), did they listen to each other and treat each other with respect (Enable Others to Act), and did they encourage each other while on the river and celebrate when they stepped onto the bank (Encourage the Heart).

Try the “Acid River” and have fun!

