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Notes for facilitators

## The triangles game

### Aim of the game

The aim is to give participants a physical, embodied experience of a simple complex system to help them think in a systemic or relational way.

### Framing and approach

There are different ways to use the game depending on the context and preferences of the group. For example, it can be used to:

- Explore leadership, reflexive behaviours, how personal or systemic our experiences are, our ideas about power and control.
- Look at the behaviours and characteristics of complex systems and how this compares with our ideas about how our programmes and organisations work and evolve.
- Take a somatic approach that looks at people's sensing and felt experience of systemic dynamics and patterns.

### Setting up the game

You need between 12-50 people for the game to work well. You can use it as a quick energiser in about 10 minutes or run a deeper exploration over 45-60 minutes, or anything in-between.

The basic set up is:

- 1 Ask people to stand in a circle so everyone can see everyone else.
- 2 Introduce the game eg "We're going to run a simple simulation of a complex system to get insight about how we can influence change."
- 3 The game has just one rule: everyone must stay the same distance from two people they choose to follow (illustrate how this can look).
- 4 Ask people to choose (privately) two others to follow.
- 5 Start the game.

Useful quote

*"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."*

John Muir, naturalist and environmental activist (1838-1914)

## Round 1 of the game

Let the game run for a few minutes. The 'system' might settle into balance and come to a stop. If it keeps moving, let it run long enough for patterns or phases to emerge.

Ask people to pause the game and stand still.

## Debrief

Useful quote

*"When we attribute behavior to personality, we lose sight of how the structure of the system shaped our choices."*

Professor John D. Sterman, MIT Sloan School of Management

Ask questions to draw out people's experiences and the sense they make of them. For example:

- What happened? Is it what you expected? What was your experience? How did it feel?
- Who has power? Who feels powerful? Who was controlling the system?
- Who thinks they know who was following them? (Check if they're right; they're often not.)
- Prompt for any observations about the system as a whole.

Ideas and suggestions for input:

- You might want to home in on the behaviours you observe eg people focusing in on the task and the detail of their individual experience versus watching the 'system' as a whole, our tendency to make up stories about others' motives or behaviour.
- You could talk about the characteristics of complex systems eg interconnectedness, feedback, time delays and the episodic nature of change. What's obvious, familiar or unexpected about these characteristics?
- Point out how simple this system is and the richness and complexity of what emerged. What does this suggest for more complex systems like communities and organisations?

## Subsequent rounds

You can run subsequent rounds where you and the group play with the relationships in the system and creating points of lower and higher leverage (influence). For example:

- Hand out to a reasonable subset of the group (at least 20%) some pieces of paper that instruct them on whom they should follow eg 'Choose X as one of the people you follow,' or 'Choose only people wearing ties,' or 'If you're wearing a tie, you must choose men to follow'.
- You can take this idea one step further by handing out labels that name things important to the context, so for a commercial organisation you might have 'CEO,' 'Customers,' 'Sales,' 'Bonuses,' 'Share price,' 'Risk-taking,' 'Staff well-being,' 'Cost-cutting' etc. When you run the game, you ask people to follow

things that make logical sense - so 'Share price' might follow 'Sales' and 'PR' for example.

Additional debrief questions for a deeper exploration:

- Did anything different happen this time? If so, what and how could we account for it?
- Did the system do what you expected? Did anything surprising happen?
- What could we do to change the behaviour of the system and your experiences as players?
- Is anything familiar? Have any insights emerged for people about their work/real lives?

### **Resources and further reading**

There's a version of this game and fantastic detail on how to use it to educate people about complex systems in *The Systems Thinking Playbook* by Linda Booth Sweeney and Dennis Meadows.

### **Contact**

I help people think and act systemically based on the science of how human systems work and flourish.

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