

March 2018

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.

Lycia Harper
+44 (0)7799 133595
lycia.harper@glowconsulting.com