

EXERCISE:

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FORMAT:

GROUP
EXERCISE,
ICEBREAKER

*Human Knot*⁴²

TIME: 20 MIN

REQUIRED MATERIALS: NONE

SUMMARY:

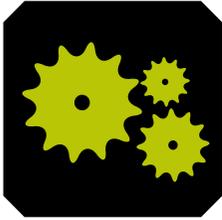
This is an energetic, and slightly complex exercise that builds trust and cohesion in the group by asking participants to form a 'human knot' by joining hands as a group, and then untangle the knot without unclasping hands.

KEY EXPLANATION POINTS:

- Ask participants to form a circle, shoulder-to-shoulder. Encouraging/urging participants to stand closer can be a subtle way of helping to prepare them for what is about to happen.
- Ask participants each to place a hand in the middle of the circle and to grasp another hand.
- To learn names and spark some fun, ask participants to introduce themselves to the person with whom they are holding hands.
- Then ask participants to put their other hand in the middle, grasp a different person's hand, and introduce themselves.
- Don't let participants let go of hands – if they do, some will be tempted to think the activity might be over, but it is only just beginning.
- Explain to participants that what you would like them to do is to untangle themselves, without letting go of hands, and form a circle.
- There will be a mixture of reactions, often including nervous laughter, amusement, excitement, trepidation, strong suspicion that it cannot be done; others may view the task as a somewhat sadistic or inappropriate joke. Some group members will have conducted the task

before, but this does not really matter – each time it is unique.

- Participants may change their grip to increase their comfort, but they are not to unclasp and re-clasp in a way that would undo the knot.
- Stand back and see what happens.
- Be prepared to see little progress for quite some time (up to 10 minutes). However, once the initial unfolding happens, the pace towards the final solution usually seems to quicken.
- As each occasion is unique, there are also odd times when a very fast solution emerges – too easily. In such cases, ask a group to try the task again – it is typically a bit harder the second time around. Occasionally, the task seems too hard and participants seem to make almost no progress. Let them struggle for about 10 minutes, then offer the group one unclasp and re-clasp – they need to discuss and decide what would be most useful.
- Most of the time a full circle takes shape, but occasionally two or even three interlocking circles emerge. So, the task really is to sort the knot into its simplest structure.

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FACILITATION NOTES:

- Be aware that the activity involves close physical proximity and touching potentially in sensitive places!
- The ideal group size is about 10, but it can be done with anywhere from seven to 16 people. Much higher or lower and the task does not really work. The more members of a group, the more difficult the task, partly because of the complexity, and partly because there is physically less room to move.
- If there are two or more groups doing the task simultaneously, have the groups reasonably spaced out, so they do not feel distracted by a sense of competition.
- Stay at a moderate distance, allowing the members of the group to engage in the activity without feeling that they are being too closely observed; but maintain good hearing contact and be ready to step in to answer questions or change the direction of the activity quickly when appropriate.
- Slowly wander around the circle, moving in and out as appropriate – for instance, if you want people to use names in every communication, this needs to be reinforced in a friendly, but firm, way, several times.
- It is relatively easy to notice who is talking, who is not, who seems comfortable, who does not. Also note that sometimes, the natural leaders are not in a good position to lead – do they try to dominate inappropriately or do they sit back appropriately and just do what they can?
- Often this activity speaks for itself as an ice-breaker. However, because it can be quite challenging, and because people often will have been pulled in all sorts of directions (literally), be prepared to have at least a short debrief, asking, for example: ‘how well did you think the group worked together?’; ‘what could have been done differently?’; or ‘what do you think you have learned from this activity that can be applied in future activities?’