

Reverse Pyramid Build

Activity Objective: Build the tallest cup pyramid starting with the top level of a single cup.

Facilitated Objective:

1. Small group interaction.
1. Communication behaviors.
2. Identifying.
3. Delegating, and taking on different roles and responsibilities.
4. Encountering and managing failure.
5. Perseverance.
6. Consensus building.



Needs Per Group:

- 36 cups (It will be good to have extra cups available in case more building levels can be achieved.)
- 1 table for each small group - rectangle tables work out the best allowing a group to be closer to their pyramid structure. However, wooden platforms, flat-top benches, or picnic tables are other options.

NOTE: We have done builds off of the floor (solid concrete or tile), but it's a bit more challenging to get enough bodies around the structure to support the lifts. Here's a thought. What about a 2 by 6 inch board about four feet long balanced across two chairs as a viable option for a building surface. Be creative in order to meet your needs.

Numbers: Create small groups of 5 to 7 players. If you have enough cups and tables one facilitator can manage as many as 10 groups building at a time.

Time: 20 to 30 minutes

Procedure: So far, based on the dynamics of the Reverse Build, we consider this a small group activity. Groups of five to seven players have worked well for us. If the situation arises where one group needs more hands they can ask players from another group to help. (This consideration might not work if the build is set up as a competitive activity. Notice, we did say “might not” work. We’ve seen competitors help each other.)

Give each group a nested stack of (36) cups and a designated building area. Here is generally what we say when we present the activity:

*For each small group, your objective is to build the tallest pyramid using the cups provided. A pyramid is defined as each **row** (not a nested stack) of cups will have one more cup than the row above it. For this build however, you are required to start from the top row of the pyramid - one cup. Set this one cup down on your building surface. Then, anyone in your group is allowed to lift this first cup so that two cups can be placed under it forming the second row of the pyramid. From this point forward you are only allowed to lift the bottom row of your pyramid structure - the row touching the table - in order to add the next row underneath.*

All other cups in the pyramid can be touched or supported by any players index fingers (only) before, during and after a lift, but they may not be grabbed and/or lifted in any way. Again, only the bottom row of the pyramid can be lifted. If any part of your pyramid structure falls apart you must start your building process over from one cup. If you manage to use all the cups provided at the start of the build, more will be given to you. After any questions you have about the directions, you will have 15 minutes of building time to see how high you can get your pyramid.

Most facilitators will answer questions without giving solutions to the challenge given. (However, if the group’s objectives allow for help or “coaching”, answer in the way that will work for them.) We often simply refer back to the rules provided. See Facilitation below for some typical inquiries.

This general presentation does not suggest any sort of competitive encounters. However, if you’ve been leading team building activities long enough, you know, in most cases, the competitive spirit does present itself. In the short life of this

activity so far, we have yet to see groups help each other, but our hopes are still high. We typically run the build for about 15 minutes to see how well each group can perform. Success is fairly certain for the first three or four rows. After, four rows it's up to the creativity, focus and tenacity of the group. Cups will be fallin'. We keep encouraging attempts as long as there is time remaining.

When our program objectives include competitive activities, we set it up a bit differently. We allow the small groups four to five minutes to practice and form a building plan. Then we give a 10-minute building window to achieve the tallest pyramid possible. They can use their 10 minutes in any way they like, as long as they stay around their building area (table) during the build. When the 10 minutes is up (i.e., when we say "Stop!") all the cups standing are worth a point value. How you score it will be up to you. We give one point for every cup that is touching another cup in a row above or below it. Or, simply count the number of rows - there are more ties in this scoring method.

As you might have determined already, the Reverse Build does not require a high level of energy, but a determined amount of focus. So, choose wisely when programming this one - what groups will benefit from this type of activity and where do you place it in your sequence?

Safety: At this time, no real safety issues have been observed. Bodies do tend to get pretty close to each other during the lift, so potentially some space issues could emerge.

Facilitation: During the Reverse Builds we have facilitated so far, we have found it important to provide our expectations of the pyramid structure. When beta testing this activity a number of groups spent a lot of time trying to find loopholes in the rules and spent little time building. We wanted this activity to help us work on the facilitated objective of working through/with failures - since, in most cases, cup tumbling does occur during the process. When we started sharing our expectation of a pyramid more hands-on building ensued. The following is the sentence in the directions that specifies our expectations:

*A pyramid is defined as each **row** (not a nested stack) of cups will have one more cup than the row above it.*

During the cooperative version, we move around the groups and continue to encourage working together and starting over after a collapse. We like to reiterate that the build is about “sticking to it”, overcoming the collapses (great metaphor to come back to), and



improving to the best of your ability. We also use this one in the hopes that groups will share strategies and maybe even resources (e.g., people) to help others be successful.

During the competitive version, we have seen two different trends. Die hard builders (DHBs) and waiters (in the act of waiting - not waiting tables). DHBs are motivated by building the tallest pyramid, using all the time allotted - especially if they know the “world record” (to date eight rows - eight cups at the bottom level - is the highest for a group of seven participants following the guidelines above (see Variations below for another presentation option and world record)).

Waiters will build the highest pyramid in relation to other groups. If they see another group has five cups at their base the waiters will go to six cups. If a group gets six cups the waiters try for seven. If they find themselves in the lead with time left they will wait it out to see if they stay on top. Some will even be happy with a tie if little time remains. All good things to discuss once the activity is over.

One more thing we would like to share at this time. If you have the opportunity to build outside atop a solid flat surface, be mindful of the wind. It can be an asset or a detriment depending on your group’s goals.

Observations/Questions:

1. Small group interaction:
 - A. Rate, on a scale of one to five by holding up your fingers on one hand, how well your group worked together. Five is “the best group work ever” and a one is, “we need lots of improvement.” If you didn’t give your group a five, what would it take from the group to raise your rating one point?
 - B. What is your comfort level working with groups? Do you prefer to work in groups or on your own? Why do you think that is for you?
 - C. What is the most challenging thing for you to overcome when working with a group?

2. Communication behaviors:
 - A. What did the communication sound like and look like during the activity?
 - B. If you could change one thing about the way you communicated with each other during the activity what would it be?

3. Identifying, delegating, and taking on different roles and responsibilities:
 - A. What roles and responsibilities did your process include?
 - B. How did these roles and responsibilities get delegated?
 - C. During your process did you find/discover the need for any additional roles and responsibilities?
 - D. Did any of the roles and responsibilities change after you started your process? Why did this happen?

4. Encountering and managing failure:
 - A. What did you find yourself focusing on more - your success or your failures?
 - B. What did you find yourselves doing after the cup collapses?
 - C. What choices do you have after a “failure”?

5. Perseverance:

- A. What does perseverance mean to you?
- B. At any point during the activity did you find yourself persevering?
- C. Which part(s) and why did you feel the need to persevere through the particular part(s)?
- D. What are the positive aspects of perseverance?
- E. What might be some negative aspects of perseverance?

6. Consensus building:

- A. What does it mean to reach consensus about a task or part of a task before starting?
- B. Did you ever reach a consensus during the activity?
- C. If you can remember, share what this looked like and sounded like.
- D. Why might reaching consensus be important to a group?
- E. When might consensus be a detriment to a group?

Variations:

- Taylor, a friend and colleague of ours, allows his building teams to rebuild a pyramid after a collapse up to where it was when it went down. For example, if the builders are lifting a pyramid that has five cups at the bottom, attempting to move in six cups, and the cups fall, the group builds up without limitations a pyramid with five cups at the base so they can make another attempt at moving in six cups. He tells us this option gives groups the motivation to build instead of waiting around for someone else to build a higher pyramid. The record for this variation, as we know right now, is a pyramid with nine cups at the base - so, a nine-row pyramid.
- Require a different combination of lifters each time a bottom row is lifted.
- Allow for adjustments to be made to the cups before a lift. Anyone from the group can touch any of the cups to make them more structurally sound. Again, they can touch any cup but not lift.

- Allow for outside resources. During one interaction of the Reverse Build, Chris did not mention that outside resources could not be used. One of the building groups remembered an oversized set of cards used in a previous activity so they picked them up and incorporated them into their build. This was a valuable learning experience for this group in relation to resources - looking around to see what was possible. Now, the kinds of resources you leave around (e.g., masking tape) will be up to you.

