

# TRAFFIC JAM: PUZZLING NORMS

Shared by Tom Leahy.

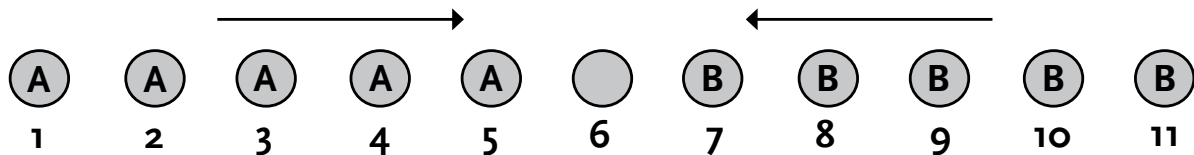
The original Traffic Jam is in Karl Rohnke's *Silver Bullets*.

**Activity Objective:** The group is challenged to solve a life-size puzzle while, at the same time, discovering the rules/norms of the puzzle.

**Facilitated Objectives:** communication, co-operation, leadership (collaborative), planning and implementation, active engagement, critical thinking, failing forward (trail and error), hidden agendas, resilience (what is it and why is it important), and resource management

**Needs & Numbers:** A spot marker (e.g., rope ring, poly spot) for each player—plus one extra. A noise maker is also needed—a buzzer or cowbell is fun, a Smart Phone application, or your own vocal cords to “BUZZ” or “Rrrrrr.” This activity works well with groups of 8 to 12. With larger groups, create smaller sub-groups, each with a facilitator.

**Time:** 30 to 40 minutes (longer if success is a factor)



## Procedure

Set out all the spot markers, plus the one extra, in a row as shown in the diagram above. Divide the group evenly into sub-groups “A” and “B”—with an odd number of players, one sub-group can have an extra player. Have sub-group players stand on their game spots. As shown in the diagram, the extra spot is initially open, dividing the two sub-groups, and the arrows point in the direction of movement for each team. The arrows also indicate which direction the players in each subgroup should be facing during the activity.



The objective is straightforward—sub-groups “A” and “B” need to exchange places in the line of spots leaving an empty spot between the two sub-groups in the end. Each player does not have to be standing in the same segment of the line to be successful. For example, the first player from sub-group “A” will finish up at the end of the line on the “B” side. Movement guidelines follow:

**Legal Moves:**

Players may move into an empty space in front of them.

If two players are face-to-face, one of them may move around the other if there is an empty spot directly behind the person he or she is facing.

**Illegal Moves:**

Players may not move backwards.

If a player is facing someone's back, the player may not move around this person.

Only one person is allowed to move at a time.

**Tom's Notable Variation**

Tom simply asks his sub-groups, after setting them up as shown in the diagram, to exchange sides. He tells them, "There are rules [norms] for your movement which you have to discover." He then uses a loud buzzer to indicate a wrong action. If players do something that does not adhere to the rules, they get "BUZZED." Legal moves do not get buzzed (a "Cheering" sound could be used when a good move is made).

This is a simple twist, and yet, a major challenge. Tom's facilitated objective is related to hidden agendas and group norms. In a wide variety of situations, we are often left to our own devices to discover agendas and norms within the social communities of which we are a part—whether we like it or not (e.g., a school community, classroom setting). With this facilitated objective, I wrap up by asking my groups what rules (agendas or norms) they discovered during the activity that contributed to their success. There are times when I require everyone in the group to be able to solve the puzzle. I tell the group, "After you complete the challenge, I will randomly choose someone from the group to walk everyone through the puzzle without any mistakes." A couple of systematic solutions follow.

**Karl's Activity Solution**

Notice the numbers under each spot on the diagram—these numbers are the key. "When the first person moves, notice whether she moves into an odd or even space. If she moves into an odd space, she and her teammates only move into odd-numbered spaces until each member reaches their final destination. The other team then only moves into even spaces until each member is in his or her final spot" (Rohnke, 2010).

**Activity Solution (source unknown)**

I have yet to work with a group that has discovered Karl's odd/even system; however, some groups have found the following pattern. Each team, in turn, takes one additional move until they take the same number of moves as there are players in their sub-group—one group will make this equal number twice. Then, the number of moves diminish by one each time until the exchange is complete. So, with a group of eight players, four in each sub-group: Sub-Group A – 1 move; Sub-Group B – 2 moves; A – 3 moves, B – 4 moves; A – 4 moves; B – 4 moves; A – 3 moves; B – 2 moves; A – 1 move. (Try this with nine circles on a piece of paper, using coins for movers.)

## **Safety**

I have yet to see any physical safety issues with Traffic Jam. I suppose if someone let themselves get very frustrated?

## **Facilitation**

Discovering the solution as a group can take some time even if the group is given all the movement rules up front. So, without the rules, it can really take a while to reach success. Be sure you have time for this. Even if your group does not reach the solution, there can still be a powerful discussion about the concept of hidden agendas and norm discovery.

Decide beforehand whether or not you are going to allow the group to use outside resources (e.g., paper and pen, smartphone app). So, add (or keep out) a rule if needed.

## **Observations/Questions**

- What does anyone need to share right now before we take a closer look at the process that took place? What do you need to get off your mind?
- What would you say was the most dominant feeling that presented itself during the activity? Why do you think this? How did this feeling affect the process?
- Who can describe the stages your group went through during the process, including the behaviors observed during each stage?
- Were you successful? What did you have to go through to achieve this success? Is it necessary to go through all of these stages to reach success? Why or Why not?
- Was there a point during the process where you noticed a “breakthrough”? What did this look like? What led to the breakthrough?
- Knowing what you know now (hindsight), what would you have done differently? How can you use this information for the future?
- Is there anything in your life experiences that have been similar to the activity in which you just participated? What do you remember learning from that experience? How can you use this information?

## **Variations**

To encourage eye-to-eye communication during the activity (versus the linear-communication model), set up the spots in a semi-circle.

*Additional Ideas:*