

## Team Building Suggestions

### Introduction

While the term “team building” can elicit some skepticism, when designed well, team building activities can help teams be more effective. This document includes several team building ideas for Bass Connections teams. You may wish to do these activities within your own team, or with other teams in your theme. Teams are also encouraged to come up with their own ideas.

If you find something great that works for your team or have feedback on any of the activities listed below, please share it with us by emailing [laura.howes@duke.edu](mailto:laura.howes@duke.edu) and we will add it to the list.

### Logistical Notes

- **Money:** We are supportive of teams using their budget to finance *reasonable* team-building expenses. Please do not ask students to self-fund their participation in any activities that carry an expense (e.g., dinners) – this is cost-prohibitive for some students.
- **Transportation:** If you plan to go off-site, please follow the [guidelines for driving with students](#).
- **Risk management:** Teams should avoid activities that may subject students to unnecessary risks (e.g., jet ski rides, white-water rafting); when in doubt, please consult with your theme administrator.

### Elements of a Good Team Building Activity

Before selecting a specific activity for your team, you might want to spend a few minutes thinking about your goals and the needs of your team. In general, effective team building activities:

- **Are designed with a clear objective in mind:** What are you trying to accomplish through the activity? For example, are you trying to demonstrate the power of teams? Or help team members get to know one another? Or are you trying to create healthy communication habits?
- **Are inclusive:** Consider the members of your team and their relative comfort zones to select an activity that will include all team members.
- **Strengthen team relationships:** The activity should help team members get to know one another better, in a constructive environment. Avoid activities that encourage *unhealthy* competition.
- **Challenge participants:** If the exercise is obvious and easy, participants will just go through the motions. Pick an activity that is likely to engage even the most reticent participants.
- **Include a debrief:** You should always take time to discuss the activity and key takeaways as a team – otherwise some team members may miss important takeaways.

### Selecting an Activity

The list of activities below is divided into three types of activities:

- [Offsite activities](#)
- [Onsite team building exercises](#)
- [Style-type indicators](#)

## Offsite Team Building Activities

### Team Dinner

Get to know one another, or celebrate mid-year accomplishments, over a meal. If you are so inclined, students also love to dine at a team leader's house.

### Volunteer Together

Work together to help the local community. Your team could help with a park clean-up, prepare and serve a meal at a local shelter, or collect donations for a local organization. Duke's [Office of Durham & Community Affairs](#) can help connect teams with volunteer opportunities.

### Bull City Escape

711 Iredell Street  
Durham, NC 27705

[info@bullcityescape.com](mailto:info@bullcityescape.com)

<https://www.bullcityescape.com/>

Bull City Escape is an exhilarating, interactive experience in which small groups are locked in a room and have 60 minutes to escape. To find the key, individuals must work together to unearth clues, solve puzzles, and crack codes. Games cost \$29 per person plus tax.

### Duke Recreation Outdoor Adventures

<https://recreation.duke.edu/programs/outdoor-adventures/trips-workshops/>

Duke Recreation offers customizable outdoor trips and team building activities for between four and 15 people. Examples include a teambuilding retreat with a picnic and canoeing at Falls Lake; canoeing the Eno River; paddleboarding at Jordan Lake; and mountain biking at Lake Crabtree (these are just examples, Duke Recreation can work with you to adapt the activity and location). Pricing varies depending on size of the group, location of activity, length of the trip, and number of meals provided.

### Frog Hollow Outdoors

614 Trent Dr.  
Durham, NC 27705  
919-416-1200

[info@froghollowoutdoors.com](mailto:info@froghollowoutdoors.com)

<http://www.froghollowoutdoors.com/>

Frog Hollow offers facilitated low ropes courses; team building activities; and canoes and kayaks for facilitated on water activities. Prices range depending on the services requested and group size but, in the past, have cost approximately \$625 for groups smaller than 18.

### Cook a Meal Together

Consider organizing a group cooking lesson through one of the following organizations:

[C'est si Bon](#)

[Durham Spirits Co.](#)

[Chef's Kitchen at the Brodhead Center](#)

## Paint a Picture Together

[ARTpost](#)

## Onsite Team Building Activities

### The Marshmallow Challenge

- **Time:** 30minutes
- **Resources:** Spaghetti, masking tape, marshmallows
- **Learning objective:** Creativity and problem-solving; team building
- **Number of people:** At least six
- **Instructions:** Divide the team into at least two teams consisting of between three and six individuals. Each team will have 20 minutes to attempt to build the tallest free-standing structure out of 25 sticks of spaghetti, one yard of masking tape, and one marshmallow. The marshmallow needs to be on top of the structure. When time is up, measure the towers and declare a winner. You can also watch a 6-minute [TED Talk](#) about the exercise.

### Poker Tower

- **Time:** 20-30 minutes
- **Resources:** Scissors, two to three decks of cards
- **Learning objective:** Creativity and problem-solving; team building
- **Number of people:** At least four
- **Instructions:** Distribute a deck of cards and a pair of scissors to each group of 2-5 members. Instruct them to build the tallest tower using ONLY the cards and scissors given to them in 15 minutes. Measure the towers and then debrief how each team divided tasks and worked together.

### Talking in Circles

- **Time:** 15-30 minutes
- **Resources:** One long string
- **Learning objective:** Communication and cooperation; team building
- **Number of people:** At least four
- **Instructions:** Place everyone in a circle around a long piece of string that is tied at its ends to form a circle. Have everyone grasp the string with both hands and hold the string waist high. Instruct the team to form different shapes one-by-one (e.g., square, rectangle, triangle, figure eight) without letting go of the string. For an extra challenge, you can repeat the game but with everyone's eyes closed! This game requires everyone to communicate clearly and listen well.

### Salt and Pepper

- **Time:** 15 minutes
- **Resources:** Paper, tape
- **Learning objective:** Communication; team bonding
- **Number of people:** At least 10 (ideally even numbered)
- **Instructions:** As a facilitator, before your meeting starts, think of pairs of things such as salt and pepper, yin and yang, shadow and light, peanut butter and jelly, Mickey and Minnie mouse, male and female, and so forth. Write each item on a piece of paper (i.e., salt on one piece and pepper on another), and tape one paper on the back of each person, making sure they can't see it. When the

game starts, everyone must walk around asking yes or no questions in order to find out what word they have taped to their backs. Once they figure that out, they need to find their other pair. Learning how to ask the right questions is the key. (Optional: The two will then sit down and learn three to five interesting facts about one another).

### Survival Game

- **Time:** 45-60 minutes
- **Resources:** Paper, instructions
- **Learning objective:** Communication; debate and reaching agreement
- **Number of people:** At least four
- **Instructions:** Chose one of the four survival scenarios below. Divide your team into two or three smaller teams of at least four individuals each (small teams can also do this with just one team). Provide each participant with a copy of the survival scenario (but not the answers). Give them 10 minutes to read it and independently rank which survival materials they think are the most important. Then, bring the teams together. In 20 minutes, each team should reach a consensus on how they would rank each of the survival materials. Once each team has written their answers down, read the expert rankings and have the teams tally their score by marking the number of points that their rank for each item differed from the expert ranking – disregard pluses or minuses. The lower the total score at the end, the better the team’s chance of survival. Debrief by discussing how the team debated differing views and came to decisions. Did someone on the team have expertise that others didn’t? How was that expertise used?

*Survival Scenarios: Please note that these links all lead to PDF files on the internet. Your computer may give you a warning to verify that you know you are opening a PDF file.*

[Plane Crash](#)

[Lost at Sea](#)

[Stranded in the Desert](#)

### Back-to-Back Drawing

- **Time:** 15 minutes
- **Resources:** Paper, pencil, pictures of shapes
- **Learning objective:** Communication
- **Number of people:** At least two
- **Instructions:** Divide your group into pairs, and have each pair sit on the floor back-to-back. Give one person in each pair a picture of a shape (you can print one offline or draw it yourself) and give the other person a pencil and pad of paper. Ask the people holding the pictures to give verbal instructions to their partner on how to draw the shape – without telling their partner what the shape is. After they've finished, ask each pair to compare their original shape with the actual drawing. Debrief by discussing how the pairs communicated to achieve the task.

### The Book of Awesome

- **Time:** 5 minutes at each team meeting (ongoing)
- **Resources:** Post-it notes; Blank notebook
- **Learning objective:** Peer recognition
- **Number of people:** The whole team
- **Instructions:** The Book of Awesome is a blank book that a team populates over time by noting when a team member has done something praise-worthy. During the first meeting, introduce the concept.

Then at every meeting thereafter, in the beginning or end of each meeting, ask anyone on the team if there is anything awesome that another team member did that they would like to recognize (e.g., “Jessica helped me edit my section of the paper” or “Omar came up with an innovative way to solve X problem”). If they do, they should write a brief phrase describing it on a post-it note, then explain what they wrote to the team, and place it in the book. Over time the book will fill up with awesome team accomplishments.

### **Tennis Ball Exercise**

- **Time:** 10-15 minutes
- **Resources:** Three tennis balls per team; one timer per team
- **Learning objective:** Creativity and problem-solving; team building
- **Number of people:** At least five people per team and one timer
- **Instructions:** Form groups of five to 10 people each (if you can only form one team that is fine too). Each team should stand up and carve out some space to work within in the room and then form a standing circle. Give each team three tennis balls and assign someone to take time for the team. Instruct each team to stand in a circle.

As the facilitator, tell all groups that you will first demonstrate with one group. Using only one ball, toss it to someone on the opposite side of the circle from you. Tell that person to toss it to someone else but remember who that someone is. Have the next person toss it to someone new, remembering who, and so on. When the last person gets it, have them start again, always passing the ball from person to person in the same order.

Ask the other groups (if you have more) to try it with one ball as well and have the timer time how long it takes for the team to finish one complete cycle of passing the ball (depending on the size of the group it will usually take about 10 seconds).

Now, ask each team to see how quickly they can pass three tennis balls one at a time, in the same order. The timer will hold the three balls to begin. The timer will pass the first ball to the first person on the team and start the timer immediately. As soon as the first person passes the ball to the next, the timer will introduce the second ball, and then the third. Stop the timer as soon as the last ball reaches the last person in the group.

The timer should tell the team what their time was, and then ask them how quickly they think they can do it without changing anything else. Let each team try a few times. The timer should note the times.

After each team has tried a few times, as a facilitator, call time out. Ask each team to share their lowest time. Most times will be between 8-15 seconds.

Then tell the teams that some teams have done it in less than one second and challenge them to beat this time. The teams can do anything they want – the only rule is that all three balls must move in the same order.

Let the teams have a few minutes to try different strategies while the timer again records their times. Then call for a break again and ask each team to share their best time and what they did to

achieve that time (the best solutions tend to be ones in which teams create a “funnel” or a “ramp” with team members’ arms and drop the balls through the funnel).

Tell participants that they may return to their seat and then debrief the exercise. What helped the team dramatically improve their time between the first and second rounds (e.g., competition, teamwork, innovation, etc.)? How did the team problem solve together? Note that this is an example of how teams can innovate and rapidly solve problems by working together.

### Icebreakers

- **Time:** 10 minutes per question
- **Resources:** Icebreaker questions
- **Learning objective:** Relationship building
- **Number of people:** The whole team
- **Instructions:** It’s likely that everyone has participated in an icebreaker at some point – where each person on a team has an opportunity to share their response to a given question with the team. Good icebreaker questions are interesting and help team members learn something new about one another. Even questions that are completely unrelated to the substance of the team’s work are valuable for helping team members build strong relationships. Team leaders could do a series of icebreakers during the first few meetings or incorporate a question into every meeting. Some examples include:
  - What is the one accomplishment in your life that you are most proud of?
  - What is your favorite childhood memory?
  - What do you hope to contribute to the team?
  - What is one thing about yourself that others would not know?
  - How do you like to work best?
  - What is your favorite holiday and why?
  - What is your favorite restaurant in Durham?
  - What’s one of your best memories of your first weeks at Duke?

### Helium Stick

- **Time:** 20 minutes
- **Resources:** A long, thin *lightweight* rod or piece of wood about 10 ft. long
- **Learning objective:** Communication, teamwork
- **Number of people:** Six to 14 per group
- **Instructions:** Instruct each team (if more than one) to form two lines, facing each other, about two arms-lengths away from each other. Ask participants to point their index fingers and hold their arms out. Lay the “helium stick” down on their fingers. Get the group to adjust their finger heights until the helium stick is horizontal and everyone's index fingers are touching the stick. Explain that the challenge is to lower the helium stick to the ground but that each person's fingers must be in contact with the helium stick at all times. Pinching or grabbing the pole is not allowed – it must rest on top of the fingers. Reiterate to the group that if anyone's finger is caught not touching the helium stick, the team must start over. Let the task begin....

Particularly in the early stages, the helium stick has a habit of mysteriously 'floating' up rather than coming down, causing much laughter. (The stick does not contain helium. The secret, which you should keep to yourself, is that the collective upwards pressure created by everyone's fingers tends

to be greater than the weight of the stick. As a result, the more a group tries, the more the stick tends to 'float' upwards).

Participants may be confused initially about the paradoxical behavior of the helium stick. Some groups or individuals may be inclined to give up after 5 to 10 minutes of trying. In this instance, the facilitator can offer direct suggestions or suggest that the group stops the task, discusses their strategy, and then has another go.

Less often, a group may appear to be succeeding too fast. In response, be particularly vigilant about fingers not touching the pole. Also make sure participants lower the pole all the way onto the ground. You can add further difficulty by adding a large washer to each end of the stick and explain that the washers should not fall off during the exercise, otherwise it's a restart.

Eventually the group needs to calm down, concentrate, and very slowly, and patiently lower the helium stick – easier said than done.

Once the team has succeeded, or given up, you can debrief by discussing:

- What was the initial reaction of the group?
- How well did the group cope with this challenge?
- What skills did it take to be successful as a group?
- What creative solutions were suggested and how were they received?
- What roles did people play?

Note: You can see a video of this exercise on You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXI-C4jQXV/k>.

## Legoman

- **Time:** 25 minutes
- **Resources:** A few sets of children's building blocks
- **Learning objective:** Communication, teamwork
- **Number of people:** At least six
- **Instructions:** Before the meeting, the facilitator will build a small sculpture with some of the building blocks and place it somewhere in the room, but keeping it hidden from plain view by a divider or some other means. Divide the team into small teams of three to six to form at least two teams and give each team enough building material so that they can duplicate the structure the facilitator has created (specific size and color included). Their task is to try to replicate the facilitator's structure.

One member from each team can come up at any point of time to look at the structure for as long as they want and try to memorize it before returning to their team. No paper, pen, or camera are allowed to be brought to the structure. After the team member who viewed the structure returns to their team, they should attempt to instruct the team to build an exact replica of the structure. Meanwhile, another member from each team can come up for another sneak peek before returning to their team and trying to recreate the sculpture. The game should be continued in this pattern until one of the teams successfully duplicates the original sculpture. This game will teach participants how to strategize, communicate effectively, and problem solve in a group.

You can debrief by discussing:

- How did those who saw the structure try to explain it to others? What was effective and what was difficult?
- Where did misunderstandings occur?
- What happened when more than one person looked at the structure?

### Style-Type Indicator

Style-type indicators are assessments that can help individuals, and their team members, understand more about how they operate in the world. Reputable indicators have been tested for validity and reliability, even so, should not be construed as “painting someone into a box.” Rather, indicators can be used as a tool to help people better understand each other and to help teams discuss how to work together most effectively by leveraging the strengths of everyone on the team.

There are many indicators available, often for purchase, but we’ve listed a free and relatively common tool below.

### Jung Typology Test (Based on the Myers-Briggs)

The Jung Typology Test is a free online version of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). This assessment is a personality inventory that can be used to help people understand one another and work together more effectively. It identifies one’s preference along four dichotomies:

- *Extraversion (E) or Introversion (I)*: The extent to which one prefers to focus on their outer or inner world.
- *Sensing (S) or Intuition (N)*: The extent to which one takes in information by focusing on tactical and concrete things such as what they see, hear, touch, taste, and smell, versus focusing on the impressions, meaning, and patterns of the information they receive.
- *Thinking (T) or Feeling (F)*: The extent to which one puts more weight on objective principles and impersonal facts versus on personal concerns and the people involved when making decisions.
- *Judging (J) or Perceiving (P)*: The extent to which one prefers a more structured and decided lifestyle or a more flexible and adaptable lifestyle.

The assessment can be accessed online at: <http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/jtypes2.asp>. It takes about 15 minutes to complete. Participants will immediately receive a short (non-detailed) description of their results. As a team leader, you can collect the results from each team member and facilitate a discussion about the differences on the team (to the extent that you are comfortable with the model).