
MINDSHIFT

A Simple Exercise to Strengthen Emotional Intelligence in Teams

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By Gayle Allen

“She needs every detail before we start, and it slows us down.”

“He acts before we agree on a plan, so we make a lot of mistakes.”

Sound familiar? These are just some of the frustrations participants share when asked to give feedback on a team experience. And they're the reasons people often prefer to work alone.

Yet it's been shown that working as a member of an effective team **can boost morale and performance**. Team members get more feedback and they get it earlier. They also report learning more and feeling more motivated to work through project challenges. With **virtual teamwork on the rise**, the potential for ongoing learning and feedback is greater than ever before.

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What that means for educators is that emotional intelligence in the form of skills like empathy and collaboration is more important than ever. That's where a simple team-building exercise, like the one below, that can help folks get started.

Quick Preparation

This activity is based on the **Compass Points** protocol developed by members of the **National School Reform Faculty**, a non-profit professional development site for educators. This activity works well with students and with adults.

To prepare, you'll want to create the four signs – North, South, East and West – in advance and post them on room walls before you begin. Be sure to have enough newsprint-size paper and markers for each of the four groups. Under each point, write out the traits associated with each sign, as directed by the Compass Points game:

North: Acting – “Let’s do it;” Likes to act, try things, plunge in.

East: Speculating – likes to look at the big picture and the possibilities before acting.

South: Caring – likes to know that everyone’s feelings have been taken into consideration and that their voices have been heard before acting.

West: Paying attention to detail —likes to know the who, what, when, where and why before acting.

The Activity (Level 1: 20 minutes)

If you have only 20 minutes, you'll want to stick to the protocol and also allow 2-3 minutes at the end for a takeaway wrap up. To start, draw everyone's attention to the four compass points

posted around the room. Ask them to read each one and then select the one that most accurately captures how they work with others on teams. They should stand at that point and remain there throughout the activity. Once everyone has decided, ask participants to observe who has ended up in which group. There may be some a-ha moments.

Next, ask each to select individuals for the following roles:

Recorder – record responses of the group

Timekeeper – keeps the group members on task

Spokesperson -- shares out on behalf of the group when time is called

Once selected, each group will have 5-8 minutes to respond to the following questions:

- 1. What are the strengths of your style? (3-4 adjectives)**
- 2. What are the limitations of your style? (3-4 adjectives)**
- 3. What style do you find most difficult to work with and why?**
- 4. What do people from other "directions" or styles need to know about you so you can work together effectively?**
- 5. What's one thing you value about each of the other three styles?**

Provide time for group members to share out their responses. Don't be surprised if you hear:

- North gets impatient with West's need for details
- West gets frustrated by North's tendency to act before planning
- South group members crave personal connections and get uncomfortable when team members' emotional needs aren't met
- East group members get bored when West gets mired in details; East gets frustrated when North dives in before agreeing on big goals

Finally, provide at least 2 minutes at the end of the activity for all participants to share out key takeaways. If any of the following don't come up, be sure to include them as part of the wrap up:

- This activity increases our awareness of our own and others' preferences
- Increased awareness opens the door to empathy
- Our preferences have their strengths and their limitations
- A diversity of preferences is what makes for better team work and results

Deepen the Learning (Level 2: 30 minutes)

If you have 30 minutes for this activity, consider adding a step to the Level 1 exercise to make it personally relevant: after participants have chosen a preference compass point, but before they've responded to activity questions, ask them to recall a personal past team experience that was either very positive or very negative. They should keep this experience to themselves for now. Let them know that they'll be talking about it later in the exercise, so that they select one they feel comfortable sharing.

Once the groups have worked through the activity and shared out responses, ask participants to recall their personal positive or negative team experience. Direct them to take a moment to reflect on whether there was anything they learned from this exercise that now helps them better understand why this past team experience was either very negative or very positive. The goal in this step is to encourage them to apply what they've been learning. There may be some a-ha moments. Provide several minutes for sharing out and then shift into key takeaways (see above).

Activity Enrichment (Level 3: 45 minutes)

If you have 45 minutes for this activity, consider adding a starting warm-up and some preferences background information before shifting into the “deepen the learning” level listed above.

For the warm up, begin by projecting an image of team members working together to achieve a goal. For example, there's a terrific image of Universal Picture's **minions working together to screw in a light bulb**. Ask participants to pair up and discuss what they notice about the team – their interactions, their facial expressions, and their progress. This can be a lighthearted yet focused way to kick off the exercise.

Next, take a few minutes to emphasize what preferences are. Share that they are our natural inclinations or tendencies. In this case, they're how we tend to behave in teams. Also share what they are not, that is, that they are not ways to label, categorize or judge us. They are also not good or bad. Some history here can also be helpful. Talking briefly about psychiatrist **Carl Jung's** work on psychology types, specifically extraversion and introversion and how Myers-Briggs' personality types research is based on Jung's work and resulted in what we now know as the **Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator** can be useful background information.

Then dive into the activity. Be sure to allow time for participants to decide on and then share out on a personal team experience. After groups share responses and individuals share some reflections on ways what they've learned applies to past team experiences, provide a few minutes for key takeaways.

Useful at Any Stage

If possible, use this activity with teams before their work begins. It's a great way to prime them for the work ahead. If teams have already begun their work or have been working together for a while, it can still be a useful tool for mid-process reflection and course corrections. Finally, if the team has completed their work, this activity still serves a useful purpose: it allows team members to reflect on interpersonal skills and what they might consider for next time. No matter when you use it, it will serve as a handy reference for ongoing discussions. If you're looking for an interactive and engaging way to strengthen team members' emotional intelligence, then this one's a winner.

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Gayle Allen spent nearly two decades as a teacher, school leader and founder of two professional development institutes. She holds an Ed.D. from Teachers College, Columbia University, where she focused her research on teacher learning. Gayle currently serves on the advisory board for [BioBuilder Educational Foundation](#) and is an edupreneur at [BrightBytes](#). She blogs at [Connecting the Thoughts](#) and tweets [@GallenTC](#).

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