Exploring Group Formation Through Work and Play at Camp

by Jim Cain, Ph.D.

While working and playing together at camp, your camp staff often works through most, if not all, of the stages of group formation, commonly referred to as forming, storming, norming, performing, and finally, transforming. While entire graduate dissertations, college and management classes, seminars, and numerous journal articles have been written on this subject, you can experience these stages of group formation through the following easy-to-use games and activities that are suitable for camp staff training. Consider the five stages of group formation and how typical summer camp staff might progress through these Stages.

The Forming Stage

This is the polite, opening, get-acquainted, ice-breaking stage of group formation. This process begins as the first staff members arrive at camp and begin moving in. The opening dinner, the general welcome comments from the director, the camp-orientation session, and even the first evening discussions and conversations prior to turning out the lights are all part of the forming stage. At this point, members of the group are just trying to identify who’s who and possibly where they fit into that plan. This stage includes forming an atmosphere of safety and acceptance that is void of controversy and filled with guidance and direction from the director or camp leader. During this stage, offer more training activities than in other stages, because it is important to build a strong foundation, if the rest of the stages are to be successfully encountered.

Believe It or Knot

Thanks to Mike Anderson of Learning Works for this excellent get-acquainted activity that is a variation of Two Truths and a Lie. With the entire group holding a Raccoon Circle (a fifteen-foot-long section of tubular climbing webbing tied with a knot), the knot is used as a pointer to identify the person talking. Begin by passing the knot to the right around the group. Someone says, "Right there!" The knot stops, and the person nearest it has the opportunity to disclose some interesting fact about themselves; for example, “I have seen three movies this week!” It is now the discussion and responsibility of the rest of the participants to decide whether they believe that this information is true or false. After some discussion, the group gives their opinion of the validity or falseness of the disclosure, and the person providing the comment can tell the real story. This single comment version of Two Truths and a Lie, proceeds a bit more quickly for each person than the complete version. Use either, as time permits.

After a person has revealed the true nature of their comments (true or false), they say “Left!” or "Right!” and then "Right there!” Now, a new person has the opportunity to disclose something to the group. The level of disclosure to the group is often a measure of the closeness, unity, and respect within the group. For example, a disclosure such as, “I have traveled to another country,” is a lower level of disclosure than “I have a family member that is in trouble with the law.” Depending on the group setting, and the purpose of this activity for your group, different levels of information or disclosure are appropriate. As the group becomes more unified, this activity can bring out greater disclosure between members of the group, family members, members of a team, etc.

Commonalities

Begin with partners for this activity. This conversational activity has the goal of identifying unique and sometimes unusual events, activities, and life experiences that we have in common with other
members of our group. The two partners need to identify three unique items that they have in common. Encourage participants to dig deep for these items. For example, they may discover that they both like dogs, but under closer examination, they may also discover that they like the same breed of dog. Additionally, they may discover that they both enjoy reading, but by digging a bit deeper, they may discover that they have read the same book in the past six months or perhaps enjoy the same author.

After identifying three attributes that they have in common, these two partners raise their hands and find another group of two ready to form a group of four. Now the challenge is to identify two items that they have in common. Again, look deep, and no fair using any of the attributes already identified.

Finally, after this group of four finds out what they have in common, they raise their hands and join another group of four, for a total of eight, now standing inside one of the Raccoon Circles spread around on the floor. The goal for these eight is to find one event, interest, or activity that they have in common. Have each of these groups of eight tell the other groups what they have in common – the more unique and unusual, the better (or at least the more interesting!).

**First Impressions**
Raccoon Circles bring people together in a variety of ways, and this activity illustrates that point. During this activity, participants are in closer physical proximity to each other, discover commonalities between participants, become acquainted at a deeper level, and learn how their instinctive guesses about others, especially those that they do not know very well, may or may not be accurate.

Begin by forming groups of three participants, seated within a Raccoon Circle. Also provide a copy of the First Impressions Activity Sheet on page 34, and a pencil or pen for each participant. The instructions for this activity are printed on the same page. Just pass out copies of this page and go!

**The Storming Stage**
This second stage of group formation introduces conflict and competition into the formerly pleasant camp environment. At camp, this stage is typically encountered around week three. Why week three? Because that is when most staff members have reached their peak in "loss of sleep." Suddenly those things that didn’t seem to matter, begin to matter, and conflicts arise. Staff behavior ranges from silence to domination in this environment, and a director or camp leader needs to demonstrate coaching to move past this stage.

While some staff members would rather avoid the conflict of this stage, it is important to build skills and show them how to cope with the storming stage. The activities in this section, therefore, contain just a bit of stress (so that the door may be "opened” to discuss what is really going on). The following activities are very challenging. You should provide a suitable amount of time after each one for discussion within the group.

**Cross the Line**
This activity requires a single untied Raccoon Circle, stretched into a straight line. With half of the group on one side of the line and standing about six feet behind the line, and the other half of the team on the other side, the scene is set for a moment of conflict (of “us” versus “them”). Make no mistake, this Raccoon Circle activity is a bit higher level than most, but it is excellent for setting the stage to talk about conflict, negotiation, and win/win, win/lose, and lose/lose scenarios.
Begin this activity by instructing one side to say, "There ain’t no flies on me. There ain’t no flies on me. There might be flies on you (point to folks on the other side). But there ain’t no flies on me!" Tell those participants to take a step towards the line (with just the right amount of attitude). Now, instruct the other side to reply, "There ain’t no flies on me. There ain’t no flies on me. There might be flies on you. But there ain’t no flies on me!" Tell those participants to take a step towards the line. The first side now repeats the phrases and moves to the line — followed by the second side repeating their lines and stepping up until they are face to face with the other side.

At this point, tell the participants, "You have ten seconds to get the person across the line from you onto your side of the line!"

Typically, this develops into a rather quick tug-of-war between partners, and usually a physical solution (for one person at least) to the challenge. The activity presents an opportunity to discuss conflict, challenge, attitude, negotiation, and how to resolve differences between people.

**Blind Square**

Blindfold the entire group, and allow them to search and find a nearby piece of rope (about 100 feet long). After finding the rope, instruct the group that their goal, while still blindfolded, is to create a perfect square with the rope. Participants are allowed to slide along the length of the rope, but cannot let go or skip over or move around another participant.

**The Norming Stage**

This third stage of group formation is typically a welcome breath of fresh air after the storming stage. Although the group is not yet at the high performing stage, some of the bugs are beginning to be worked out within the group, and good things are beginning to happen. This stage of group formation includes cohesion, sharing and trust building, creativity, and skill acquisition. The director or camp leader demonstrates support during this stage.

**Inside Out**

This is a great initial problem-solving activity. Begin with a Raccoon Circle on the floor. Have the entire group step inside the circle. The task is now for the entire group to go from the inside of the circle to the outside, by going underneath the Raccoon Circle, without anyone in the group using their hands, arms, or shoulders.

What is important in this activity, is to stress the group problem-solving process. In order for other members of the group to assist in the completion of the task, they need to know the plan, and what their part is in the solution. To this end, encourage the group to “plan their work” and then “work their plan.” This means that prior to ANY action, the group will need to plan their approach to solving this problem and making sure that everyone in the group knows their part of the plan.

After completing the task, debriefing questions include asking the group if they had a plan and did they change the plan during the completion of the activity, and if so, why? As a second part to this activity, you can also ask the group to go Outside In, again without using their hands, arms, or shoulders and see if they “plan their work” before “working their plan.” Thanks to Tom Heck for sharing this activity.

**Not Knots**

In this activity, which can be accomplished with only a single piece of webbing (in a straight line,
without a water knot), a “doodle” is constructed, and the group is given the choice of whether this doodle will create a “Knot” or “Not a Knot”, when the ends of the webbing are pulled.

The object here is to provide the group with some tools to use when they cannot easily form a consensus. Typically, upon analysis, about half of the group thinks the doodle will form a knot, and the other half a straight line. If this is the case, ask participants to partner with another person that has a different viewpoint (i.e., one partner from the “Knot” side and one partner from the “Not a Knot” side). By learning how to listen to a person with a different viewpoint, group members learn how to cooperate. After this discussion, ask participants to choose sides, with the “Knot” decision folks on one side of the knot doodle, and the “Not a Knot” folks on the other side.

At this point, it is likely that there will still not be a complete consensus within the group. Prior to slowly pulling the ends of the knot doodle, let the members of the group know that you will pull the knot doodle slowly, and that they can change sides at any time during the unraveling of the knot doodle (this illustrates the ability to make an initial decision, but still be flexible as more information becomes available).

**The Performing Stage**

The fourth stage of group formation includes a feeling of unity, group identity, interdependence, and independence. It is a highly productive stage. Leadership from the camp director or leader comes in the form of delegation. This stage provides challenging activities that can be successfully accomplished by the group and builds enthusiasm. Large group projects, such as tower building (using Tinkertoys®, uncooked spaghetti and marshmallows, or newspaper and masking tape), and challenge courses (low and high ropes activities) are useful.

**Grand Prix Racing**

Turn the Raccoon Circle into a complete circle or loop using a water knot, and you are ready for the ultimate in sport racing. Thanks to Tom Heck for not only the idea for this activity, but also the enthusiasm to lead it effectively. This activity will boost the enthusiasm of your audience, and provide some moderate competition in the process.

Begin by spreading several Raccoon Circles around the available space, in close proximity to each other. Ask participants to join one of the “racing teams,” picking their favorite color team in the process. There should be approximately five to ten participants per Raccoon Circle. Have participants hold the Raccoon Circle with both hands in front of them, and state:

"Ladies and Gentlemen! It is summertime, and that means one thing in this part of the world — Grand Prix Racing! Now I know that you are such die-hard race fans that just the thought of a race makes your heart beat faster. So this race comes in three parts. First, when I say, ‘We’re going to have a race,’ your response is a loud, ‘Yahoo!!!!’ Next I’ll say, ‘Start your engines!’ And, I want to hear your best race car sounds (audience practices making race car revving engine, shifting gears, and braking sounds).

"Finally, with so many cars on the track today, it will be difficult to see just which group finishes their race first, so we’ll need a sign indicating when your group is finished. That sign is to raise your hands (and the Raccoon Circle) above your heads and yell, ‘Yessssssssss!’"
Logistically, Grand Prix involves having the group transfer the knot around the group as quickly as possible, using only their hands. This activity can even be performed for a seated audience. To begin, you’ll need a “start/finish” line, which can be the person that was born the farthest distance away from the present location. The race begins at this location and ends when the knot is passed around the circle and returns to this same location.

Typically in Raccoon Circle Grand Prix racing, there are three qualifying rounds or races. The first race is a single lap race to the right (counterclockwise), with the knot traveling once around the inside of the circle. The second race is a multi-lap race (two or three laps) to the left (clockwise) around the circle. And the final race of the series is a “winner take all” championship race, with one lap to the right followed by one lap to the left.

Incidentally, after this activity, the group will not only be energized, but perhaps in a slightly competitive mood. From a sequencing standpoint, you can either continue this atmosphere (with more competitive challenges — such as into a summer camp competition) or introduce a bit of counterpoint, by following this activity with one that requires the group working together in a collaborative manner.

**The Transforming Stage**

The final stage of group formation is the other bookend to the initial forming stage. The transforming stage allows the group to regroup, thank the participants, and move on at the completion of the summer. This stage is marked by recognition from the leader, conclusion, and disengagement of the participants.

**Virtual Slideshow**

With all participants seated in a circle, an imaginary slide projector “clicker” is passed around the group. Group members are asked to “show” an imaginary slide or photograph from the summer, illustrating a perfect moment, or perhaps a moment from the future, that will be different because that person had the opportunity to work at camp.

**A Circle of Kindness**

Form a double circle with all group members. One partner should face the center of the circle, and their partner behind them (also facing the center, with their hands on the shoulders of the inner-circle person). Ask participants in the inner circle to close their eyes and only reply “thank you” or keep silent. The outer circle is asked to quietly talk into the ear of the inner-circle participants, mentioning something important that they learned from them during the summer, or a pleasant memory, or any other positive comment. The outer group then moves one person to the right and continues. When the outer group has completed the circle, they are asked to become the inner-circle group, and the process begins again.

Jim Cain, Ph.D. is the author of Teamwork & Teamplay, which received the Karl Rohnke Creativity Award presented by the Association for Experiential Education, and co-author with Tom Smith of The Book on Raccoon Circles. He is a former executive director of the Association for Challenge Course Technology, senior consultant to the Cornell University Corporate Teambuilding Program, and the director of the adventure-based training company, Teamwork & Teamplay. You can download a collection of adventure-based, team-building activities using simple props at: [www.teamworkandteamplay.com/raccooncircles.html](http://www.teamworkandteamplay.com/raccooncircles.html). Contact Dr. Cain at 585-637-0328, jimcain@teamworkandteamplay.com.
The Book on Raccoon Circles and Teamwork and TeamPlay are available from the ACA Bookstore.

References and Resources
For a more detailed explanation of the group-formation stages and techniques for exploring them with your summer camp staff, use the following resources:

Publications


Organizations
Teamwork & Teamplay, 585-637-0328
The Adventure Group, 800-706-0064
Adventure Hardware, 800-706-0064
Learning Unlimited, 888-622-4203
Kendall Hunt Publishers, 800-228-0810
The Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT), 616-685-0670
The Association for Experiential Education (AEE), 303-440-8844
Active Reviewing
Fundoing, 888-638-6565

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