



BUILDING YOUR TEAM

A TEAM BUILDING & LEADERSHIP WHITEPAPER

MEETING ICEBREAKER SERIES

The Marshmallow Challenge Team Building Icebreaker

Setup, rules, and debrief questions for a 20-minute activity

Teams race to build the tallest freestanding tower out of dry spaghetti, tape, and string.
A marshmallow must sit on top.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One simple activity turns a half-present meeting into a real conversation.

Your team files into the conference room. Laptops snap open. Phones come out. Everyone is half-present before the meeting even starts.

Sound familiar? One simple fix changes all of that.

The marshmallow challenge team building activity is a fast, hilarious, and surprisingly revealing exercise. Teams race to build the tallest freestanding tower using dry spaghetti, tape, and string. There is one catch, though. A marshmallow must sit on top. Results are always entertaining and surprisingly insightful.

This activity works in almost any setting. It is perfect for new team orientations, company off-sites, department kick-off meetings, and leadership workshops. It also works well when you are combining two teams who have never worked together before. The energy it creates is immediate. You will have people laughing, arguing, and high-fiving within the first two minutes.

The debrief at the end can also have a meaningful impact on the team. Just by asking a few questions, you can turn a silly building contest into a genuine conversation about planning, leadership, and how your team actually works under pressure.

You do not need a big budget or a professional facilitator. All you need is 20 minutes and a trip to the dollar store.

18 min

build time on the countdown clock

4–5

people per team, mixed across departments

20

sticks of dry spaghetti in each kit

CONTENTS

- 01 How to Set Up the Activity Before Your Meeting**
 - 02 Step-by-Step Instructions for Leading the Challenge**
 - 03 Debrief Questions to Drive Real Learning**
 - 04 References & Further Reading**
-

How to Set Up the Marshmallow Challenge Team Building Activity Before Your Meeting



Good prep makes this activity run smoothly. Fortunately, the setup takes about 10 minutes the night before or the morning of your event.

Materials needed (per team of 4 to 5 people)

- **20 sticks** of dry spaghetti
- **1 yard** of masking tape
- **1 yard** of string or twine
- A **standard-sized marshmallow**
- **1 pair of scissors** (optional but helpful)

First, pre-assemble each kit in a small paper bag or zip-lock bag before the meeting. This saves time and keeps the rules fair. Every team gets the exact same supplies.

You will also need a flat work surface for each team. A conference table, folding table, or any hard surface works well. Teams should be able to stand around it and work comfortably.

Additionally, use a tape measure or yardstick to measure the towers at the end. A countdown timer displayed on a screen or monitor adds urgency and keeps the energy high.

Set up one work area per team before participants arrive. Place each kit in the center of the table. Do not let teams open the bags until you give the signal. The anticipation is part of the fun.

For groups of 20 or more, consider recruiting one observer per table. Observers watch for rules violations and measure towers at the end. This keeps the facilitator free to circulate the room and keep the energy up.

Step-by-Step Instructions for Leading the Marshmallow Tower Challenge



Once your teams are assembled and kits are on the tables, follow these steps to run a clean, energetic activity.

1 Divide into teams.

Break your group into teams of four to five people. Mixing departments or roles makes the activity more interesting and builds cross-functional connections. Avoid letting people self-select into their usual cliques.

2 Explain the rules out loud.

Read these rules clearly before anyone touches the supplies.

- Teams have **18 minutes** to build the tallest freestanding structure they can.
- The marshmallow must sit on the very top of the finished structure.
- Teams may use any or all of the materials in their kit.
- Tape and string may be cut or broken into smaller pieces.
- Spaghetti sticks may also be broken.
- When time is called, the structure must stand on its own. No one may hold it up.
- Finally, the marshmallow cannot be altered, eaten, or broken apart.

3 Start the timer and say go.

Next, start your 18-minute countdown and step back. However, resist the urge to help or hint. Let the chaos happen naturally. Walk around the room, encourage teams, and point out good moments of collaboration. Keep the energy up without interfering.

4 Call time.

Once the timer hits zero, everyone stops and steps back from their structures. Measure each freestanding tower from the table surface to the bottom of the marshmallow. Towers that are leaning, collapsing, or being held by a participant do not count.

5 Announce the winner.

Celebrate the winning team. A small prize is a nice touch but not required. Even a round of applause and bragging rights works perfectly. Take a quick photo of the winning tower before you move into the debrief.

Debrief Questions to Drive Real Learning After the Marshmallow Challenge

This is where the activity earns its place in your meeting agenda. Building the tower is fun. Afterward, the conversation is where the real value lives. Therefore, give this section at least five to seven minutes.

Gather everyone together and work through a few of these questions. You do not need to use all of them. For instance, pick the ones that fit your team's needs and the themes you saw play out during the activity.

Here Are a Few Potential Debrief Questions You Can Choose From.

- Did your team create a plan first or just start building?
- Did you test your structure before the final minute? Why or why not?
- Would the activity have been easier if each person had done it alone or in a group? Why?
- What would you do differently if you ran this activity again right now?
- When did you first put the marshmallow on top?

RESEARCH INSIGHT

One insight worth sharing with your group: research by designer Tom Wujec found that recent MBA graduates consistently perform worse on this challenge than kindergartners. Why? Kids prototype immediately. They stick the marshmallow on top early and keep adjusting. Business school graduates, by contrast, spend most of their time planning and jockeying for position. They put the marshmallow on last. And it collapses.

That story always lands. It makes the debrief feel less like a debrief and more like a genuine insight. [Watch Tom Wujec's TED talk "Build a tower, build a team"](#)

As a result, the marshmallow challenge team-building activity works because it is both ridiculous and real at the same time.

Your team will be laughing about it for weeks. And the best ones will remember the lesson for much longer than that.

References & Further Reading

- 01 **Tom Wujec.** "Build a tower, build a team." TED2010. ted.com/talks/tom_wujec_build_a_tower_build_a_team
- 02 **Building Your Team.** The Marshmallow Challenge Team Building Icebreaker (source article). buildingyourteam.com/marshmallow-challenge-team-building
- 03 **Building Your Team.** The Trading Cards Icebreaker: How to Deal Your Team a Winning Hand. buildingyourteam.com/the-trading-cards-icebreaker-how-to-deal-your-team-a-winning-hand
- 04 **Building Your Team.** The Spectrogram Icebreaker: How to Gauge Group Alignment in Minutes. buildingyourteam.com/the-spectrogram-icebreaker-how-to-gauge-group-alignment-in-minutes
- 05 **Building Your Team.** More meeting icebreakers and team building ideas. buildingyourteam.com/blog

ABOUT



Building Your Team publishes practical meeting icebreakers, team building activities, and leadership tips for managers who run their own meetings. It is a publication of The Leaders Institute, a corporate team building and leadership training company founded in 2002 and based in Arlington, Texas.

Want help running this with your team?

Tell us about your group and your meeting, and we will point you to the right activity.

[Request Information](https://buildingyourteam.com/contact)

buildingyourteam.com/contact