

A Game Plan

A game is like a case study but with the participants on the inside rather than the outside.

By Stephen E. Sugar

There's a "little world" that only a board game can bring, the world inside the case study. Board games are being used in training programs and as conference wrap-up exercises.

A game is an excellent way to summarize conference meetings and workshops, and to provide an appropriate mix of company and conference information. It is also simply a fun way to close a conference. But, a board game at a conference for engineers?

The first step in providing a board game for a recent week-long career development conference for Public Health Service engineers was to convince the conference committee that it was a good idea. That required meeting with the committee to allay any misgivings about the suitability of the game for the subject and the audience.

The first hurdle was deciding whether a game should be played at all at an engineers' conference. Engineers were seen as too serious for fun and games. The committee gave the go-ahead, however, after the members participated in a model demonstration, in which they actually played a board game and had fun doing it.

Once the game was sanctioned, the following finer points had to be negotiated: getting up-channel approval, getting staff release time to develop the game, creating a budget, and preparing or finding the neces-

sary materials. A 12-week window was opened to research, resource, and implement a board game appropriate for a conference of engineers.

The initial task in developing any game is to create a plan to design, test, and produce it.

A game plan

A basic plan for developing a board game includes producing the frame; creating the content, which consists mainly of preparing the game cards; preparing and printing the rules of play; designing and printing the game board; and purchasing game pieces.

Producing the frame. First, an existing board game called "Management

Engineer Bingo

I was introduced by the host of the conference wrap-up session as the "King of Fun and Games," and invited to the front of the room with the cry, "Come on down!" The mood was set; conference attendees were ready for some fun.

I accepted the microphone and the challenge. As I explained the concept of the board game and the rules of play, the game materials were distributed. The question cards were shuffled and placed alongside the game boards, and the teams selected their dice and chips. The players were asked if they were ready. "Yes!" they said. I instructed the team with the white die to roll first. The game was underway!

After what seemed an interminable silence, the noise of the game slowly began to fill the large conference room. It started with a cheer or two for questions answered correctly, followed by "awhs" for missed questions. Occasionally, someone requested a point of clarification on the rules.

Suddenly, one group of players stood and announced, "We have really enjoyed this seminar!" There was a momentary silence

while the other players observed this very unengineer-like behavior. As game play resumed, another group stood up and made the same announcement. By the third announcement, the players caught on—this must be part of the game. (Cards in the game gave the following instructions: place your chip on the space that matches the number on your die and stand up as a team and say, "We have really enjoyed this seminar!")

Animated chatter filled the room as the players got caught up in the game. Play continued until one group suddenly yelled, "Bingo!" All play ceased while the first prizes were awarded. The other players noted the moment and enviously eyed the prizes.

When play continued, it seemed more fervent. The players had become more goal-oriented. After all, there were questions to be answered and prizes to be won. After a few minutes, a second group triumphantly shouted, "Bingo!" but as we tried to pause for the second set of awards, play continued. The players had become involved in their own little world of the board game.

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2000" was immediately renamed "Engineer Bingo." The same game format had also been used successfully for medical training ("Medical Bingo") and for a hospital public relations program ("Hospital Bingo"). The board frame works well at conferences because board games are conducive to team play. A frame doesn't have to be a board, however. Another example of a very simple frame is the crossword puzzle. The format is usually similar, but the content changes from puzzle to puzzle. In board games, a basic board configuration can serve as the frame for a variety of content.

In addition to the game surface, a frame includes the game pieces—dice, chips, and tokens, for example—and the rules.

Creating the content. The content is the heart of the game, and it provides the element of reality the game brings to its audience. The nature and quality of the questions and information on the game cards produce an environment hospitable to learning and add to the simulation of reality. Well-written cards enhance every aspect of learning, including the game's quotient of fun.

Data on which the content—questions and information—is based should be collected from the proper resources. For example, research for "Engineering Bingo" concentrated on conference speakers. Once collected, the data are converted into concise, readable questions.

Writing questions for board games differs greatly from writing other training materials. Game questions must stand alone within the game environment. The basic approach is to collect data, prepare draft questions, circulate sample questions, and revise question material from feedback.

For a conference board game to reflect the total conference experience, some questions can come from supplemental conference materials such as tourist pamphlets and public relations releases. In the question mix for "Engineer Bingo," for every eight questions about information pertinent to the conference, a ninth question covered an activity. That guaranteed a balance of knowledge and experience in the game content.

When producing the question

cards, game designers should try to give them the feel of "real" game cards in order to add to the game's authenticity.

Preparing and printing the rules of play. The rules should be scrutinized by the conference committee—as indeed they were for the engineers' conference—and revised as needed.

Game rules should take into account the intended audience. They should also be readable and easily understood by the players. After final revisions, print the rules on heavy paper stock so players can consult them in the heat of play without causing obvious wear and tear.

The conference committee should also review the rules with respect to what kind of game equipment will be needed. By including this step in rule preparation, the overall plan immediately focuses on finding or producing the necessary game materials.

Designing and printing the game board. An existing game board format can be used and adjusted to the specifications of a game under development. In the case of "Engineer Bingo," the existing game board format, borrowed from "Management 2000," was enlarged because it proved too difficult to play on and would have required specially made chips. Extra game boards should be provided to account for spoilage and loaners.

Purchasing the game pieces. One obvious economical approach to developing a game is to use readily available, inexpensive materials from existing, non-training games. For example, enlarging the game board for "Engineer Bingo" permitted the use of standard-size poker chips. Additionally, prizes may be given to add to the competitive spirit of the game.

Evaluation

The final session was an assessment to evaluate the whole conference, including activities. The results indicated that "Engineer Bingo," a game, ranked among the top three events.

When the conference was still in the planning stage, and before a board game was incorporated into the plan, the sponsors' highest priority was to maintain a professional atmosphere. Indeed, the mission of the conference was to promote and underscore the

professionalism of the Public Health Service.

Even in this highly professional environment, a board game accomplished something—it reminded the engineers at the conference that new methods can create new perspectives and that learning can be fun as well as informative. ■

Engineer Bingo: How To Play the Game

Rules of play. The object of the game is to fill a row on the scorecard with chips—horizontally, vertically, or diagonally—in much the same way regular "Bingo" is played.

Teams—of 2 to 4 players each—are grouped by twos. Each team selects a stack of chips and a matching die. The cards are shuffled and placed alongside the board. Each team elects a captain, who is responsible for stating the answer to any question.

Game play. The team with the white die goes first. If the team rolls a six, it loses its turn. Otherwise, a player from the opposing team draws a question card and reads it aloud. The captain of the playing team must answer the question within one minute. If the answer is correct, the team can cover any unoccupied space on the playing board that matches the number on its die. If the answer is incorrect, the team loses its turn and play switches to the other team.

If the team rolls a number and all spaces on the playing board matching that number are occupied, the team loses its turn. Play switches after the completion of each turn.

Strategies. Each team has the option of using its chips to go for a win, or to go for a block by occupying a space that the other team needs.

Game equipment. Equipment includes the game board, 20 white chips, 20 red chips, a set of rules, 2 die (a white and a red), and 180 question cards.