

Increasing Employee Cohesion Utilizing a Low-Elements Challenge Course: A Case Study

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Abstract: This case study discusses an intervention that utilizes a challenge course to increase employee cohesion among employees of a residential treatment center for adolescents. The 26 employees who participated in the challenge course were tested on their levels of cohesion both pre and post intervention. Results of the study indicate that employee cohesion was significantly increased immediately after participation in the challenge course intervention ($t = 5.204, p < .001$). In addition, a follow-up survey was completed by 19 of the original 26 participants. Results show that employee cohesion was not significantly different from the post-test six weeks after the intervention ($t = 1.975, p < .064$) thus indicating that the effect held six weeks post intervention.

Keywords: Employee cohesion, low-elements, ropes course, and challenge course

Social workers are charged with promoting individual welfare and helping people to achieve their maximum potential. As agencies are placed under increasing monetary restraints, resources are taxed, and employees asked to do more, interventions that help people work together assume even greater significance. Any intervention, then, that helps to bond people together into a cohesive unit is important and should be explored.

Providing residential treatment for adolescents can be a stressful and daunting task. The authors were approached by management of a residential treatment center and asked to help increase the perceived sense of cohesion among the employees. The authors met with case managers, directors, secretaries and other support staff of a residential treatment home for children. The purpose was to test an intervention technique (a challenge course) designed to increase employee cohesion. The second purpose was the pilot testing of an Employee Cohesion Scale, developed by the authors. The major research question to be answered was “can a low-elements challenge course increase cohesion among employees?” For the purpose of this study a low-elements challenge course was defined as “a series of non-competitive activities designed to allow participants to build positive social interactions, expand awareness, stretch personal limits, and build group cohesiveness.” The primary goal of the intervention included the following: development of leadership, communication, trust, and cooperation through verbal and non-verbal skills (Faulkner, 2002; Sturdivant, 1990). It was expected that by-products would be increased communication skills, trust, and bonding among staff members.

Ropes courses or challenge courses (as they are referred to in this article) are a series of structured activities that require group members to work together, utilizing communication and problem solving skills in order to solve the problem. An example of this would be one of the activities known as the “Helium Hula Hoop.” Group members stand in a circle, shoulder to shoulder, with their arms extended at shoulder level – index fingers extended towards the middle of the circle. A hula hoop is placed on the extended index fingers and group members are asked to lower the hula hoop to the ground. The initial reaction of the group is to raise the hula hoop (thus the name – Helium Hula Hoop). Group members must work together using communication skills to successfully lower the hoop to the ground. Each activity is carefully sequenced, requiring the group to utilize greater communication skills and problem-solving activities to solve each task.

Literature Review

Challenge course interventions, or Ropes Courses, have been used for decades in a variety of settings for multiple purposes. A Ropes Course refers to an outdoor experience adapted from the Outward Bound Program. Participation can range from one to two days (eight or sixteen hours). Most courses are structured as a one-day experience, however. Participation involves a series of trust building and problem-solving activities followed by a physically challenging course using cables and beams. The course is divided into low elements and high elements. Safety equipment involving harnesses, hard hats, and belay ropes are utilized at all times when participating in the high elements.

The Ropes Course is not a new intervention tool. It is the product of a long transition of outdoor therapy and adventure education and education exercises. The exact origins of the outdoor adventure and education experience are vague and open to debate. One author, however, attributes the origin of outdoor challenge courses to the French Navy in the late 1800's (Jakubowski, 1986). George Hebert is credited with creating a series of outdoor problems and obstacles to be negotiated as part of the sailors training.

Still others argue that the first Ropes Course can be credited to the Outward Bound Program developed in Great Britain during World War II. This program grew out of a concern that, due to faulty training, many young merchant seamen were dying unnecessarily. It was hypothesized that a variation on the traditional obstacle course might help these sailors develop inner strength to survive (Miner & Boldt, 1981). Hahn is the individual who started the Outward Bound Program. He originally created the program to increase self-awareness and self-esteem (Debring, Willis, & Genet, 1987). These programs are based upon the theory that learning occurs best when the individual is involved in the process in some active way (thus the term experiential education) (Gass, 1993).

While the exact origin of the modern day Ropes Course is still a matter of debate and may never be known for certain, it does not diminish the contributions that this intervention has made to modern day therapy. The growth in popularity of the Ropes Course is directly attributed to the growth of the Outward Bound Schools in the United States. Outward Bound is a network of outdoor education schools throughout the world. They incorporate a variety of experiences to achieve their goals including: rock climbing, mountaineering, rafting and sailing. Outward Bound names four philosophical objectives that are a fundamental aspect of the program are self-reliance, physical fitness, craftsmanship, discipline and compassion (Outward Bound, 1980).

One aspect of this program is the Ropes Course. The Ropes Course has grown and evolved with time. A main contributor to this evolution is Karl Rohnke. Rohnke began as an instructor for Outward Bound and then later became the founder of Project Adventure - another outdoor adventure and experiential education program. Rohnke is associated with helping to develop new aspects to the Ropes Course (commonly referred to as elements) (Rohnke, 1985).

Ropes Courses have become widely accepted and today are employed in a multitude of settings. They can be found in psychiatric hospitals, Veterans Administration (VA) Hospitals, college campuses, residential treatment centers, and as part of family therapy programs. Bowen, et al, (2016) discusses how an adventure-based program such as a Ropes Course can have an effect on delinquent behavior. The author utilized adventure-based programs (and a Ropes Course in particular) which were part of a youth camps and programs. Stewart, Carreau, and Bruner (2016) demonstrated similar results with increase in self-esteem among adolescents in their studies. Whitney and Early (2016) provides an overview of the utilization of a Ropes Course to build cohesion in Resident Hall Assistants. These benefits included increased self-esteem, increased communication and trust, and greater problem solving ability.

Researchers have utilized the Outward Bound program to assess its impact on the mental health of participants. One group of researchers evaluated the impact of the program with male military veterans. This study revealed that the program assisted in improving participants' mental health status (Scheinfield, Rochlen, & Russell, 2017). Bettmann, Scheinfeld, Prince and Garland (2018) found similar findings in their research with veterans. This study emphasized not only the improved mental health symptoms of participants but also a more positive perception of seeking mental health assistance.

Family groups have also reported increased cohesion after the challenge course intervention. Increasing the cohesion among family group members has been linked to a number of positive outcomes including: overall functioning of adolescents, reduction in suicidal behavior, and feelings of bonding and closeness (Faddis & Cobb, 2016; Faulkner, 2001; Rubinstein, Halton, Kasten, Rubin & Stechler, 1998). Kriel, Schreck, and Watson (2016) utilized outdoor activities with a high-intensity ropes course as one of the activities. This study found that trust, respect, problem-solving skills, communication, motivation and self-esteem were all positively impacted by the activities completed by the families. This study focused on single-parent families (Kriel, Schreck and Watson, 2016).

In at least one study that involved long-term residential treatment for adolescents and their families, Van den Brink (1983) reports changes in self-confidence, increased problem solving ability, perseverance, self-

reliance, self-discipline, and emotional growth in children and their families after participating in adventure programming. Gillis and Gass (1992) incorporated a Ropes Course into their marriage and family therapy with positive results. They reported increased self-esteem, increased trust (both inter and intra personally), and increased communication skills as the positive outcomes. Greene (1992) examined the effects of a Ropes Course in conjunction with diabetes camp. The essential question was "can the inclusion of the Ropes Course improve the family functioning?" His answer was, "yes, the Ropes Course made a difference." Similarly, DeDiego, Wheat and Fletcher (2016) utilized a Ropes Course to help adolescents cope with grief.

Other specialized populations that have benefited from the challenge course experience are women and individuals struggling to recover from chemical dependency. A study conducted by Clem, Smith and Richards (2012) included adult women seeking substance abuse treatment with a residential facility. Quantitative (pre- and post-tests) and qualitative analysis (focus groups) were applied in this study. This single-group study discovered that a challenge course can improve abstinence self-efficacy and group cohesion. Similar results were found in previous studies (Stophra, 1995; Hart & Silka, 1994; Gass & McPhee, 1990). Faulkner (2002) also demonstrated that a low-elements challenge course could be effective in increasing communication and problem-solving skills in a case study of substance abusers.

Another specialized population that has benefited from investigations utilizing Ropes Courses as the intervention include college students. One study focused on master level students majoring in a counseling program (clinical mental health or school counseling). The activities took place during a student orientation which included activities facilitating introductions, a low ropes activity and group discussions. In this qualitative study, participants reported feeling less anxious about beginning the program and feelings of personal growth. According to the researchers "The top five domains included positive affect (n = 22), 2nd-year students (n = 16), anxiety reduction (n = 15), fun (n = 15), and cohesiveness (n = 14)" (Schimmel, Daniels, Wassif & Jacobs, 2016, p. 34). Bell and Hong (2017) reported that outdoor orientation programs do contribute to improved student retention. These activities seem to contribute to students' feelings of social and academic acceptance. A study conducted by Crabtree and Demchick (2015) took place on a university campus within the Campus Recreation Services utilizing the Challenge Course program. This study focused on participants diagnosed with autism. The age range of participants was 17 to 34 years old. The results of this study indicate an improved level of social competence especially in the area of communicating with others (Crabtree & Demchick, 2015).

While studies regarding employee cohesion and Ropes Course interventions are limited, Eatough, Chang and Hall (2015) studied a military, medical facility and utility company workgroup. The goal of the study was to research group cohesion, group member's trust, improvements in self-efficacy and group- efficacy. With the exception of self-efficacy, all three groups reported improvement in all areas researched.

The authors of this study were interested in utilizing the low-elements of a Ropes Course as an intervention method for increasing cohesion among employees. Because the case study was conducted in a rural area and no Ropes Course was immediately available, the researchers adopted low-elements and made them portable. Elements were created that could be transported to the employee site. A complete list of activities is given below in Appendix A. Because the course is adapted and designed to be portable the authors have chosen to call their course a "Challenge Course." As stated earlier, the purpose of this intervention was twofold: to pilot test an intervention technique that would be used in later studies; and to increase the level of cohesion among staff members.

Methods

The researchers utilized a quasi-experimental, pre-test, post-test design to measure the cohesion level among employees. Employee cohesion was operationalized utilizing the Employee Cohesion Scale (see Appendix B). This eight-item scale is scored by summing the items and then averaging the total. Scores can range from a low of one (indicating low cohesion) to a total of five (with higher scores implying higher levels of cohesion among employees).

Employees of a residential treatment center in eastern Kentucky were recruited to participate in the pilot study. A total of 26 employees (n = 26) elected to participate. No incentives (other than the potential for increased cohesion among group members was employed). Group members were given the Employee Cohesion Scale as a pre-test and then asked to participate in the experiential intervention. The intervention consisted of approximately three hours of activities that required group members to cooperate, communicate, and share ideas to solve problems presented to them. (For a complete list of games and initiatives that were utilized see Appendix A).

After completing the challenges, group members were asked to complete the post-test (same as the pre-test). Group members were informed, at that time, that they would be receiving a follow-up survey (the same Employee Cohesion Scale) in four to six weeks to measure the retention effect of the intervention.

Six weeks later, employees who had completed the intervention were mailed a follow-up survey. A total of nineteen people responded to the follow-up survey. Results of the follow-up survey were compared to the post-test.

Results

All statistical procedures were completed utilizing the Statistical Program for Social Services (SPSS). Even though the scale used for this study is new and norms are still being established, the initial indicators are that the scale has both consistency and internal validity. A Factor Analysis was completed on the Employee Cohesion Scale. The Factor Analysis showed only one factor (see Table 1 below) with all components loading at .60 or higher.

Table 1
 Component Matrix

	Component 1	Component 2
ECS1	.727	.512
ECS2	.835	-.385
ECS3	.840	3.74E-02
ECS4	.819	-.480
ECS5	.621	.481
ECS6	.861	-.276
ECS7	.841	.212
ECS8	.846	8.323E-02

Note. Extraction Method: Principle Component Analysis; 2 components extracted

In addition, internal consistency was determined using Cronbach's Alpha. Internal consistency was demonstrated to be high with all eight items loading at .90 or higher (see Table 2 below).

Table 2

Reliability Analysis-Scale (Alpha)

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Alpha if Item Deleted
ECS1	29.8846	20.8262	.6452	.9149
ECS2	30.0000	19.6800	.7827	.9047
ECS3	30.0385	18.9985	.7719	.9047
ECS4	30.2308	18.7446	.7597	.9058
ECS5	29.7692	22.3446	.5393	.9225
ECS6	30.3077	17.6615	.8107	.9020
ECS7	30.5385	18.1785	.7805	.9044
ECS8	30.1923	18.8015	.7904	.9031

Note. N of cases: 26; N of items: 8; Alpha: .9188;

Using a paired samples T-test, the results of the intervention indicate that the intervention was a success ($t = 5.24, p < .001$) (see Table 3 below). Note: the same significance level was achieved when using Chi-Square.

Table 3
 Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences							
	Mean	Std. Deviat.	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2 tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Pretest- post-test total	.375	.36742	.07206	-.5234	-.2266	-5.204	25	.000

Six weeks later, when a follow-up survey was sent to participants, 19 respondents reported an overall mean of 4.5724. When a paired samples T-test was administered between the post-test scores and the follow-up scores the results showed that the effect had held and there was no significant difference between the post-test and follow-up scores ($t = 1.975$, $p < .064$) (see Table 4 below). Note: using Chi-Square significance was .049.

Table 4
 Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences						t	df	Sig. (2 tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviat.	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
				Lower	Upper				
Pair 1 Post-test total	.1579	.34842	.07993	-.0100	-.3258	1.975	18	.064	

Discussion

While this study has some inherent limitations (small sample size, convenience sample, lack of comparison group) the results supported a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores in this sample. This indicates that employees reported an immediate increase in cohesion with their coworkers as a result of the intervention (the challenge course activities). Other studies utilizing a challenge course intervention have demonstrated similar findings in other groups (Eatough, Chang and Hall 2015, Faulkner, 2001; Faulkner, 2002;). This study has implications for social work on several levels. The implications for managers and administrators have application to direct practice. Increasing cohesion among employees can lead to a heightened sense of employee satisfaction, increased problem solving abilities, and greater morale. Implications for policy are equally significant. In times of budget constraints, shrinking resources, and expanding demands administrators are often faced with the daunting tasks of getting more productivity out of their staff with less resources to accomplish the job. However, before managers can adopt informed practices and implement new programs, a workforce needs to have communication, cooperation, and cohesion. As more corporations, agencies, and businesses move towards a total quality management approach to service provision policies that foster cohesion become even more salient. This intervention can help administrators to better perform their own jobs while helping staff to feel more bonded.

The implications for research involve future studies and answering questions posed by this study. One such question is just how long the intervention will last. While this effect held for six weeks after the intervention it is still uncertain how long the effect lasts before reintroduction of a similar intervention. One positive aspect, however, is that the techniques are easy to learn and can be incorporated into a staff meeting, or short workshop – participants do not have to spend hours away from their office to develop cohesion. Future research needs to focus on answering the question as to length of effect as well as conducting a larger, more rigorous study utilizing a comparison group.

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Appendix A

Challenge Course Activities

Ice-Breaker Exercises (2 Way Hula Hoop and Metamorphosis)

These activities are simple in nature and meant only as icebreakers and as warm-up activities.

Activity One:

Group Juggle/Warp Speed

Group Juggle/Warp Speed are introductory activities which serve two purposes. One to break the ice and introduce participants to the concepts behind ROPES activities, and second to promote group unity and cooperation. The activity (Group Juggle) starts off by having the group stand in a circle and passing a ball to each member until order is established. Eventually, this simple activity becomes more hectic as more balls are introduced into the pattern. Once the group has completed the group juggle, usually with three or more balls, the game of Warp Speed is introduced. The object of Warp Speed is to move one ball through the same order of people in the least amount of time. The group is encouraged to abstract and think through many solutions to the problem. Most groups significantly beat the times they originally project for completing the activity.

Rules:

1. The ball must always travel in the same order
2. The group may do anything they like to improve their time as long as the ball contacts each participant in the original order.

Activity Two:

Trolleys

The Trolleys are team skis, which promote a concentrated group effort in order to be successful. The object of the initiative is to move the group from point "A" to point "B." This is not a timed activity and the group may use any form of communication and leadership combination to complete the exercise. The team may be required to pick-up certain objects along their path and these objects will cause the team to have to successfully negotiate several turns.

Activity Three:

Human Knot/King's Platter

The object of the Human Knot is to form a circle from an entangled group of participants. This activity promotes communication among group members and presents a challenge that can be easily overcome with positive effort from participants.

Rules:

1. The group must form a circle and join hands with two different participants across from themselves.
2. Each group member may not let go of the other participant's hands until the activity is complete.
3. The group is told to form a circle without letting go of one another's hand.

King's Platter

The object of King's Platter is to have all group members stand on a 3'x3' board without touching the ground for three seconds. This activity has some similarities with the board game Twister, but requires the participation of all group members. The group is told a story about how they are the community leaders of a fictional land. A harsh winter causes vast food shortages and they may receive food for the villages and cities they represent by paying taxes to the local king. The "taxes" are a graduated set of challenges culminating with everyone standing on the Platter without touching the ground.

Rules:

1. Everyone must participate and have fun.

Activity Four:

Hot Chocolate River

The object of Hot Chocolate River is to move the entire group from point "A" to point "B." This is accomplished by using "magic marshmallows." The story is very important because it encourages the participants to become connected to the activity. The scenario is that the group is an indigenous group of

natives who live on an island. They are caught on the other side of a river when a volcano erupts and separates them from their families. In order to get home they must cross the Hot Chocolate River.

Rules:

1. The participants must cross using only the blocks given to them. These blocks may not be slid across the floor, thrown, or tossed to teammates.
2. A participant must have some sort of body contact at all times with any blocks placed in the river. If a block is left unattended then the current of the river may sweep the block away.
3. If a person falls into the river the he/she must return to the beginning. If she/he falls again, then the entire team must return and start over again. Other “consequences” may occur at the facilitator’s discretion (such as issuing a blindfold, or making the group mute for a period of time). The facilitator needs to ensure that consequences are not punitive and apply to the maturity and capability of the group.
4. The entire team must reach the other side of the river in order to complete the goal of the activity.

Activity Five:

Traffic Jam –

The object is for the entire group to trade places on a beam while lined up facing each other without stepping off onto the floor. The group must work together as a team to negotiate the course of the beams.

Rules –

At no time, can a group member step off of the beams or intermittent platforms. If a group member steps down onto the floor, the entire group has to return to the beginning and start-over.

Activity Six:

Hula Hoop Pass

The object is for the entire group to pass a Hula Hoop around a circle (while holding hands) without letting go or letting the Hula Hoop touch the floor.

Rules at no time may group members let go of the person’s hands they are holding or let the Hula Hoop touch the floor.

Activity Seven:

Tug of Peace

The object is for group members to line-up along a rope as in a traditional tug of war. However, the object is for group members to pull members from the other team to a standing position (when starting out with all group members seated on the ground). By using cooperation everyone can come to a standing position at the same time.

Appendix B
Employee Cohesion Scale

1. On the whole I am satisfied with the people I work with.

Not at All		Neutral		Very Much
1	2	3	4	5

2. My coworkers and I work together to find solutions to problems.

Not at All		Neutral		Very Much
1	2	3	4	5

3. I feel a sense of closeness with my coworkers.

Not at All		Neutral		Very Much
1	2	3	4	5

4. When I make suggestions, my coworkers listen to me.

Not at All		Neutral		Very Much
1	2	3	4	5

5. In general, I like the people I work with.

Not at All		Neutral		Very Much
1	2	3	4	5

6. In general, I feel free to share my opinions and ideas with my coworkers.

Not at All		Neutral		Very Much
1	2	3	4	5

7. My coworkers are receptive to feedback and criticism.

Not at All		Neutral		Very Much
1	2	3	4	5

8. My coworkers attempt to include me at work.

Not at All		Neutral		Very Much
1	2	3	4	5