WORKSHOPSKILL · PARTICIPANT KIT

Paper Tower — Participant Workbook

The guide in print, a frame to write after every debrief question, and session notes pages.

Folder: `paper-tower` · Category: communication · 3–5 per team · 30 min · offline · print props · assessment-type

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30
MINUTES

print props
SETTING

Paper Tower — Facilitator Run Sheet

Teams get twenty sheets of paper and one meter of tape. Twelve minutes later, the tallest tower that holds a book for ten seconds wins. The build is loud and fun — and it quietly records how the team plans, shares information and recovers when things lean.

Objectives

By the end of the activity, participants will have:

1. Watched their team's **planning behavior under time pressure** — who talks, who builds, who is silent.
2. Experienced the trade between **height and stability** — the same trade their projects make weekly.
3. Practiced one recovery move: **stop, diagnose, change one thing** — when the tower starts to lean.

Setup

Space: one table per team, two meters between tables (towers need judging room).

Materials per team:

Item	Source
20 × A4 sheets	any recycling bin — used paper is fine
1 m × masking tape	one strip, pre-cut, on the table
1 × builder card	`paper-tower-prop-cards.pdf` (card 1)
1 × judge card	`paper-tower-prop-cards.pdf` (card 2)
1 × timing card	`paper-tower-prop-cards.pdf` (card 3) — for you

Forbidden: scissors, rulers, extra tape, phone towers. Hands only. Paper may be torn, folded, rolled, crushed — not cut.

Grouping rule: teams of 3–5. Mix departments if the group allows — the debrief question "what did you assume about your teammates?" only works across silos.

Minute-by-minute script

Time	Phase	Facilitator does	Participants do
0–2	Frame	"Twenty sheets, one meter of tape, twelve minutes of building. The tallest tower that holds this book for ten seconds wins. No scissors — hands only."	Take cards, form teams
2–5	Silent planning	"For three minutes: plan on paper. No building, no tape."	Teams sketch and argue on paper

Time	Phase	Facilitator does	Participants do
5–17	Build (12 min)	Float. At minute 10 announce: “two minutes left.” Do not help with structure	Build, test, tear down, rebuild
17–20	The book test	Each team places the book on top, counts to ten out loud. Judge card scores each tower	Watch other towers fail or hold
20–23	Self-score	“Score your own team on the judge card — including the arguments.”	Teams self-score honestly
23–30	Bridge to debrief	“Keep the towers standing until after the debrief — they are the data.”	Towers stay up

Then run the debrief — see `paper-tower-debrief.md`.

Known failure modes & rescues

1. **One engineer, four spectators.** The loudest builder takes over; others hold tape. Rescue: at minute 8, freeze the room: “hands off — everyone names one thing the tower needs next.” Then build resumes.
2. **The team builds a column and hopes.** No folding, no triangles — a rolled sheet stands alone. Rescue: none needed. The collapse is the debrief’s best exhibit. Restart is allowed inside the 12 minutes.
3. **Silent planning was skipped.** Someone starts rolling paper at minute three. Rescue: enforce it gently — “planning is a round too.” The contrast between planned and un-planned towers is the lesson.

Variations

- **Mid-build rule change:** at minute 10, announce the book test for the first time. Teams that over-invested in height now scramble for stability — exactly like a requirement change.
- **Online:** teams build at home with identical kits (10 sheets + 1 m tape, mailed or self-supplied); measuring happens on camera with a household book.
- **Assessment-type:** run the pre-measure before teams form, and the post-measure right after the debrief — see `paper-tower-assessment.json`. The interesting number is the delta, not the score.

Props in this folder

- `paper-tower-prop-cards.pdf` — poker print-ready: builder / judge / timing cards
- `paper-tower-guide.md` — this run sheet
- `paper-tower-debrief.md` — 8 debrief questions, 3 failure modes
- `paper-tower-assessment.json` — pre/post measure preset
- `paper-tower-paper-form.pdf` — the A4 answer sheet: the measure as a print-and-fill form
- `paper-tower-workbook.pdf` — participant workbook: the idea in plain words, guided items, notes and action pages

- `paper-tower-slide-deck.pdf` — the slide deck for teaching or projecting
- `paper-tower-slide-deck.html` — the same deck for any browser, speaker notes on N
- `paper-tower-license.md` — what you may do with all of this, in plain language
- `paper-tower-activity-poster.pdf` — The whole activity on one wall (A3): meta, run of show, debrief questions, watch-outs.
- `paper-tower-start-here.md` — one page, thirty seconds, then print and go
- `SKILL.md` — machine-readable manifest for AI agents
- `paper-tower-run-sheet.pdf` — the print edition: this run sheet + the debrief sheet, bound as one A4 PDF

Agent version

Every file in this folder has a stable public URL — an AI agent can fetch the props, the debrief and this run sheet with three curl commands (see `SKILL.md`). The build itself needs no screen: paper, tape, and a book to test with.

Paper Tower — Debrief Sheet

> 8 questions, 3 failure modes, one rule: the tower is the transcript.
>
> Use with `paper-tower-guide.md`. Debrief runs 10–15 min after the book test.

How to run this debrief

- Keep every tower standing through the whole debrief. Point at them, don't describe them.
- Ask questions **to one team first**, then to the room. Start with the shortest tower that survived the book, or the tallest one that didn't.
- Write answers on this sheet or on the back of the judge card — teams keep them.

The 8 questions

1. The plan on paper.

"What did your team plan in the silent three minutes — and what actually survived contact with the tape?"

→ Targets: planning vs. improvising. Most teams abandon the sketch by minute seven.

2. Hands and voices.

"Whose hands were on the tower, and whose voices were around the table? Were they the same people?"

→ Targets: participation structure. The tape-holder who never spoke is the finding.

3. The lean.

"When the tower started to lean, what did your team do first — diagnose, or build faster?"

→ Targets: recovery behavior. "Build faster" under pressure is the daily default.

4. Height vs. the book.

“Your tower chose height or stability before you knew the book was coming. Where does your team make that same bet on real projects?”

→ Transfer question. Expect: features vs. tests, launch scope, tech debt.

5. The one change.

“If you could restart with one change — materials, roles, or plan — which single change would you make?”

→ Commitment question. Make it singular — one change survives Monday.

6. The silent teammate.

“To the quietest builder: what did you see that the team didn’t ask about?”

→ Perspective question. Ask this gently; it usually surfaces the best observation in the room.

7. The other towers.

“Which other team’s tower taught you something? What was it?”

→ Cross-team learning. Breaks the silo the grouping rule built on purpose.

8. The daily version.

“Where in your actual week does your team build ’as tall as possible, as fast as possible’ — and where is your book test?”

→ Closing question. It ends the debrief on their own deadlines, not on paper.

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3 known failure modes of the debrief itself

1. **The collapse becomes comedy.** A dramatic collapse gets laughs; the room wants the blooper reel.
   Rescue: laugh once, then stand next to the fallen tower and ask question 3. The wreckage is the exhibit.
2. **Blame lands on the builder.** “If only Alex had folded the base…”
   Rescue: reframe — “the tower is 20 sheets of evidence about a *team*, not a person.” Question 2 is the pivot.
3. **Winners disengage.** The winning team thinks the debrief is for the losers.
   Rescue: ask them question 7 first. Winners analyzing other towers is the strongest close.

If you are running the pre/post measure (`paper-tower-assessment.json`), note these observables during the build — they justify the delta in the report:

Observable	Points to
Team sketches before touching tape	Shared planning habit
Roles named out loud in minute one	Role clarity
A silent member’s idea gets built	Information flow
After a collapse: pause, then a changed approach	Recovery from failure

The report your participants receive is a self-comparison, never a team ranking — keep it that way when you present it.

The plan on paper.

What did your team plan in the silent three minutes — and what actually survived contact with the tape?

Hands and voices.

Whose hands were on the tower, and whose voices were around the table? Were they the same people?

The lean.

When the tower started to lean, what did your team do first — diagnose, or build faster?

Height vs. the book.

Your tower chose height or stability before you knew the book was coming. Where does your team make that same bet on real projects?

The one change.

If you could restart with one change — materials, roles, or plan — which single change would you make?

The silent teammate.

To the quietest builder: what did you see that the team didn't ask about?

The other towers.

Which other team's tower taught you something? What was it?

The daily version.

Where in your actual week does your team build 'as tall as possible, as fast as possible' — and where is your book test?

Session notes