

The Committed Sardines

A Workshop for Change Agents in Complex Human Systems

Facilitator's Guide

The Workshop	2
Introduction	2
Setup	3
Timing	3
Rules of Play	4
The Exercises	6
Notes for Facilitators	11
Learning Objectives	11
The Simulation	11
Briefing and Debriefing	13

Based on the Agile Games session “Stop Training, Start Schooling”
by Derek W. Wade and David A. Koontz in Boston MA, April 2018

You can download a copy of this Guide at <http://bit.ly/CommittedSardinesGame>

If you facilitate a Committed Sardines workshop, please tell us how it went; comment at the URL above!

version 1.0 — April 6 2018

The Workshop

Introduction

The Committed Sardines is intended for leaders, managers, consultants, community organizers, and other organizational change agents working in environments where psychological safety is low.

It quickly allows players to experience the effects of directive change such as mandating/training new behavior without consideration for social factors. The workshop offers an alternative approach to encouraging innovation, improvement, or other changes to the status quo.

Context

High-performing organizations innovate. Whether they are leadership teams, software teams, or a loose organization of volunteers working to effect social change, they achieve results by being willing to challenge the status quo.

This can be scary. It's all very well to be ordered to "fail fast" or "think outside of the box," but without the belief that we can do so without looking foolish or being punished we tend to do what everyone around us is doing.

Ignoring the power of psychological safety is how organizations get stuck. We buy heavy-weight, detailed processes. We hire armies of consultants. We set up a chain of command. We define roles and responsibilities in great detail. We run everyone through training classes with hundreds of slides to ensure compliance with our new method.

But somehow, people are even less innovative. More wary. Our fear of threat causes us to become so fixated on doing the new process correctly that we have no thought for performance.

Requirements

The simulation scales from 10 - 50 people.

For every 20 learners, open space equivalent to a large-sized (25' x 25') meeting room cleared of tables/chairs should suffice.

One facilitator per 20 learners is appropriate.

The workshop can be completed in 60 minutes, but 90 is ideal.

Numbered cards, see "Percentage Cards" in the Setup section.

Setup

Room:

- Chairs/tables removed or pushed to periphery
- A starting location for the “Safe Coral Reef”
- A goal location, 10’ - 20’ away from the starting location, for the “Yummy Plankton” area

It may be helpful to make posters/signs denoting key locations:

- “Eaten Sardines” area
- “Yummy Plankton” area
- “Safe Coral Reef” area

You may wish to create flip-charts or handouts for information about the exercises:

- Mapping of simulation elements to real-world experience (see Table 1 in the “Notes for Facilitators” section)
- Rules of Play (key points)
- Number card breakout for a ‘wary class’ (see Exercise 3)
- Number card breakout for a ‘bold class’ (see Exercise 3)

“Percentage cards”

- A set of cards/small papers, individually and sequentially numbered from 1 to 10, enough so that there is one for each player
- “Take a number” rolls or raffle tickets work well if you instruct players to look at the final 2 digits
- Playing cards can work if the cards are sorted Ace to 10 and all other cards removed

Timing

90m Session	Event	60m Session
0:05	Introduction	N/A
(0:25)	Exercise 1 — Familiarization, Practice ‘Schooling’	(0:15)
0:10	Exercise 1: Brief	0:05
0:05	Exercise 1: Play	0:05
0:10	Exercise 1: Debrief	0:05
(0:20)	Exercise 2 — Introduce Goal/Threat	(0:20)
0:05	Exercise 2: Brief	0:05
0:05	Exercise 2: Play	0:05
0:10	Exercise 2: Debrief	0:10
(0:20)	Exercise 3 — Committed Sardines	(0:15)
0:05	Exercise 3: Brief	0:05
0:05	Exercise 3: Play	0:05
0:10	Exercise 3: Debrief	0:05
0:10	Final Debrief & Call to Action	0:10
0:10	(Available for additional Q&A or action steps)	N/A

Rules of Play

There are 3 roles to play: **Sardines**, the **Whale(s)**, and **Committed Sardines**.

All rules are always in effect, however some are only relevant to certain exercises.

Facilitators should monitor and encourage all players to follow the movement rules for their role, but without enforcing or directing player choices.

For All Players

These rules help assure safety and appropriate play. Facilitators should strive to ensure that players are not moving too quickly given the environment.

1. "Ocean life doesn't speak English," so **no talking to each other during play except for safety.**
2. "Ocean life needs to breathe," so **players must always keep moving, no stops.**
3. "Ocean life needs room to breathe," so **no player may get closer than 1 foot to another player.**
4. "Sardines are small fish" so they must **take very small steps, "as if your shoelaces were tied together."**
5. "Whales are large but slow" so while they **may take full strides, but slowly, slower than a normal walk.**
6. **Absolutely no running!**

For Sardines

1. "Sardines school," so they are **NOT ALLOWED to be more than 1 arms-length away from a neighbor.**
2. Movement:
 1. "Sardines are individually agile" so **they may make very tight turns.**
 2. "Sardines aren't crabs" so they **may move forward or make moving turns, but no side-steps or backward steps.**
3. "Sardines are at risk of being eaten by Whales." **If a Whale taps a Sardine on the shoulder, that Sardine is "eaten" and the Sardine must wait at the "Eaten Sardines" area for the rest of the exercise.**
4. "Sardines stay safe in schools"
 1. Sardines **inside the school are totally safe.**
 2. A Sardine on the **periphery** of the school is **safe only within LESS THAN arm's length of its neighbor Sardines.**
 3. If a Sardine on the **periphery** of the school is **ONE ARM'S LENGTH OR FURTHER from its neighbor Sardines, it may be eaten** by a Whale.

For Whales

1. Movement

1. “Whales are big and can swim faster than Sardines,” at a **slow walking pace**
2. “Whales are also not crabs, but don’t turn as well as Sardines” so they also **must make moving turns, but cannot turn as sharply** (*The Facilitator should demonstrate this: about 30° turn — 1/3 of a right-angle turn — per step taken*)
3. “Whales are afraid of large school of Sardines,” so **Whales may not get closer to the periphery of the school than just under their OWN arm’s length** (*no diving into the school*)

2. “Whales love to eat Sardines”

1. A Whale may eat a Sardine by **tapping that Sardine on the shoulder. The Sardine must then wait at the “Eaten Sardines” area** for the rest of the exercise.
2. Whales may eat a Sardine **only if it is ONE ARM’S LENGTH OR FURTHER from its neighbor Sardines**
3. If a Sardine is **within LESS THAN arm’s length of its neighbor Sardines, the Whale may not eat it.**

Committed Sardines

1. Movement: Committed Sardines **ARE ALLOWED to move as far as 2 arms’ lengths from their neighbors.**

NOTE!! THIS RULE, PLUS THE WHALE’S RULE ABOUT NOT GETTING CLOSER THAN 1 ARM’S LENGTH TO THE PERIPHERY OF THE SCHOOL, MEANS THAT A COMMITTED SARDINE MOVING OUT BEYOND THE PERIPHERY OF THE SCHOOL **MAY EXPOSE A NEW PERIPHERY AND MAKE PREVIOUSLY-SAFE SARDINES VULNERABLE!**

2. This movement rule does not affect Committed Sardine safety; **the same rules for Sardines about being eaten apply to Committed Sardines.** (“They’re committed, not special.”)
3. Committed Sardines are **instructed by the Facilitator** to “head for the Yummy Plankton (goal location), and don’t be deterred!”

The Exercises

Exercise 1

Facilitator notes: This is a practice round to get players used to the rules. You are also building the Sardines' awareness of the threat/consequences of "getting eaten" and their attachment to "staying inside the school."

There's no Yummy Plankton/goal location and no Whale/threat.

Briefing:

1. Distribute the Percentage Cards (very important!)
 1. "Don't share these with anyone else, don't lose them, we'll use them later"
2. Set up the Sardine school
 1. All start ~2' away from each other (can face same direction or all different directions)
 2. Start at the Safe Coral Reef
3. Demonstrate the rules with some volunteer Sardines.
 1. Movement -- must move, speed, turning
 2. Demonstrate minimum, safe, maximum/unsafe distance
 3. Demonstrate 0 risk inside the school, max risk outside the school

Play:

1. Keep it short... ~5m at most.
2. Reinforce the rules (movement speed, turning, min/max distance)
3. Reinforce the 'threat' of possible Whales: Facilitators wander around and identify the periphery of the school as potentially vulnerable to getting eaten.

Debrief:

1. "WHAT" (Feelings/Facts)
 1. "How'd that feel? What happened?"
 2. *Clarify rules as needed.*
2. "SO WHAT" (Interpretation)
 1. "How is this like work?"
 2. "What are some of the ways in which we see conformity at work?"
 3. "What are some of the perceived whales/threats? Are they real?"
 4. *This is a good place to show the mapping of real-life elements to simulated elements.*
3. "WHAT IF" (Generalization)
 1. "What if Sardines could move any which way (we can't tell where they are headed)?"
 2. "What if we were mandated to go to a certain spot?"
4. "WHAT NOW" (Application)
 1. *This will be minimal, but amplify insights that appear.*

Exercise 2 — Introduce Goal/Threat

Facilitator Notes: Add the “real” threat of the Whale and add a goal.

Briefing:

1. Reset the Sardine school, in starting location
2. Remind everyone of the reason why Sardines school (Introduce the Whale)
 1. Demonstrate the rules with a volunteer Whale and a smaller subset of the Sardine School
 1. Whale movement speed, turning radius
 2. Whale fear of large school (no closer than just under their own arm’s length)
 3. Pull out 2 Sardines to about 2 arm’s length from the School and demonstrate that the newly-vulnerable periphery
 2. Demonstrate conditions under which Whale can/cannot eat a Sardine
 3. Point out the “eaten Sardine” area
3. Goal for Sardine School
 1. Get to target location -- “There’s a lot of Yummy Plankton right here”
 2. All previous rules still in effect; Sardines MUST try to stay within arm’s length
4. Whale
 1. (privately brief Whale) “Goal is to pick up stragglers, not to aggressively feed!”

Play:

Take special note of any individuals attempting to go hard for the goal, individuals who tried but then shied away — they could be good topics for the debrief.

Reinforce the rules for both Whales and Sardines (movement speed, turning, min/max distance)

Depending on the room layout and Sardine behavior, you may wish to pause the game and add a second Whale.

Debrief:

1. “WHAT” (Feelings/Facts)
 1. “How’d that feel/what happened?”
 2. *Handle exceptions, reinforce/clarify rules if needed*
 3. “How many Sardines were actually eaten?”
 4. “How many (raise hands) felt they were aggressively attempting to get to reward?”
2. “SO WHAT” (Interpretation)
 1. “How is this like work?”
 2. “What effect did the goal have on your personal behavior? On the School’s behavior?”
 3. “What effect did the Whale have on your personal behavior? On the School’s?”
 4. (For eaten Sardines) “Why did you get eaten?” “How does that happen at work?”
 5. “Was there more or less harmony/disruption in the School? Why? Do we see that during big change initiatives at work?”

How you debrief the final 2 portions depends on how well the School reached the goal:

(Exercise 2 Debrief, continued)

If none or very few of the Sardines reached the goal, or many were eaten:

3. “WHAT IF” (Generalization)

1. “Why wasn’t the Yummy Plankton enough to get us over there?”
2. “Do you think people who don’t know the benefits of <process change> are about as interested in it as you are in plankton?”
3. “What happens at work when there’s not enough of a change to reach our goals?”
4. “What real life equivalents have you seen of getting ‘eaten by the Whale’ for doing something differently? How does that affect our willingness to change?”

If most or all of the Sardines reached the goal, with few eaten:

3. “WHAT IF” (Generalization)

1. “Why didn’t the threat of the Whale keep you from getting to the plankton? Is this behavior typical of an employee in the typical company attempting a <process change>?”
2. “Do you think change agents are no more threatened by change than you are by a pretend Whale? Do you think people who are undergoing <process change> feel differently?”
3. “What real life equivalents have you seen of getting ‘just going for the plankton’ despite a threat?”

4. “WHAT NOW” (Application)

1. We have modeled all risk as one Whale — a simplification — What are the other risks <in your situation>?
2. “What can be done to make <process change> seem worth those risk we face? Do you think that’s enough to catalyze the change?”
3. Discuss training:
 1. The typical approach: get everyone to ‘change’ at once
 2. “Classroom training... but do people still have to face the risk of BEHAVING differently from everyone else?”
4. What other change tactics would overcome the fear of your ‘Whales?’
(Possibilities: partnering with people experienced in the new process; hands on coaching; “get out of jail free cards” (pre-approved forgiveness of errors/missed deadlines, etc.)

Exercise 3 — Committed Sardines

Facilitator Notes: Introduce the Committed Sardines; convert a portion of the School to Committed Sardines depending on what happened in Exercise 2.

Briefing:

1. Remind people of their Percentage Cards.
Remind them not to show their number to anyone else!
2. In Exercise 2 if the School **failed to reach the goal**, select 40% to be Committed Sardines:
 1. Players with **cards #5 — #10 = Normal Sardine**
 2. Players with **cards #1 — #4 = Committed Sardines.**
3. In Exercise 2 if the School **strongly reached the goal**, select 20% to be Committed Sardines:
 1. Players with **cards #3 — #10 = Normal Sardine**
 2. Players with **cards #1 — #2 = Committed Sardines.**
4. Brief the Committed Sardines
 1. Allowed to move 2 arms' length away from nearest neighbor
 2. No special safety.
 3. Try to get to target location -- "You're starving and there's a lot of yummy plankton right here"
5. Brief the (normal) Sardines:
 1. "Please do not try to go for the goal."
 2. "Don't AVOID it, but primary directive is to stay within arm's length."
6. Brief the Whale privately
 1. As before, but possibly with more aggressive hunting ;)

Play: As before.

Debrief:

This will likely be emergent depending on key events the Facilitator wishes to emphasize for their context or situation.

1. "WHAT" (Feelings/Facts) — "What was that like? What happened?"
2. "SO WHAT" (Interpretation)
 1. "What was different for you? What was surprising?"
 2. "Why did it happen that way?"
 3. "Was the Sardine School perfectly aligned? What was that like for you?"
3. "WHAT IF" (Generalization)
 1. "What if we warned you about the confusion/disruption and said it was ok?"
 2. "What if we couldn't see where the Committed Sardines and their neighbors were headed? Do we see that at work?"
 3. "What is the minimum % of Committed Sardines you think you need at work? Why? Why higher/lower than here in the game?"
 4. "What forces at work cause that kind of cohesion?"

(Exercise 3 Debrief, continued)

4. "WHAT NOW" (Application)
 1. "How can we amplify those cohesive forces?"
 2. "How can we better prepare/guide organizations through the disruption?"

Final Debrief & Call to Action

Closing discussion

1. Tell the story of the Committed Sardines. Can also give other examples:
 1. New York Subway and cleaning Nazi propaganda
 2. Ice Bucket Challenge
 3. Penn Station homeless — 4 different police agencies working at cross-purposes; leaders worked together; line workers saw leaders working together
2. Group cohesion as a force to leverage.
3. Engagement strategies. Some we can suggest:
 1. Find the Committed Sardines via OpenSpace Agility program of Engagement and Invitation.
 2. Find the Committed Sardines via the applications for conferences and proposal submissions.
4. The importance of visibility.
 1. Raise visibility via a trophy wall - where we celebrate our successes (and failures).

Call to action

1. How would you find the Committed Sardines at your organization?
2. How can you improve visibility to the Committed Sardines?
3. How can you apply these lessons everywhere?
 1. A small meeting that's spinning its wheels?
 2. Your whole organization?
 3. Social change?

Notes for Facilitators

Learning Objectives

Experiential learning (simulation and debriefing) can be effective at changing both the beliefs that drive behavior and personal/interpersonal behavior itself. As a facilitator selecting and running a simulation-based exercise, it is important to consider your learners' desired behavioral changes.

The primary performance objective for participants of The Committed Sardines is:

Leverage key factors of group behavior to raise psychological safety, and therefore create opportunities for improved performance, for a group.

The workshop promotes the beliefs and behaviors below.

1. *"Our weakness is our strength"*

- State 3 principles of social change:
 1. Environments with low psychological safety promote a fear of deviation from established norms
 2. Fear of deviation is a motivating force which creates behavioral cohesion among a group
 3. Behavioral cohesion can be leveraged to bring about positive change
- Given a situation where people demonstrate fear of deviating from established norms, identify ways in which that fear can create behavioral cohesion. Suggest possible ways to exploit this behavioral cohesion to bring about improved group behavior.

2. *"It's easier than you think"*

- State 2 principles of disruptive change:
 1. A small, committed percentage of deviation is enough to disrupt status quo
 2. The psychological impacts of disruption must be softened by setting expectations
- Given a situation where people demonstrate fear of deviating from established norms, identify positive deviations from those norms possible by a small group. Suggest ways to improve the safety for that small group.

3. *"Visibility = safety = speed"*

- State principles of amplifying positive deviation using network effects:
 1. The more the 'status quo' can see the 'deviants', the more effectively the change will occur
 2. Deviation/disruption carries its own psychological costs to the members of the organization, but they can be managed via setting expectations
- Given a situation where people demonstrate fear of deviating from established norms, identify ways to celebrate and make visible the positive deviations (even if not effective.) Identify ways to set expectations of disruption to raise psychological safety and make the change occur more effectively.

The Simulation

The Committed Sardines is a simulation of emergent "schooling/swarming" behavior. The players are "sardines" who have simple individual behaviors (e.g. "stay close to your neighbor, keep moving, seek the food, don't get eaten by the whale") which give rise to complex behaviors as a group — just as in a team or organization.

The Story of the Committed Sardines

Ian Jukes, an educational author and public speaker from New Zealand began a blog titled “The Committed Sardine,” so named because of a metaphor he used to frame the impact that a few committed teachers can make on a school:

A blue whale is the largest mammal on earth. The adult blue whale is the length of 2½ Greyhound buses and weighs more than a fully loaded 737 [airplane]. A little known fact is that a blue whale is so large that when it decides to turn around, it can take 3 to 5 minutes to turn 180 degrees.

As a result, some people have drawn a strong parallel between blue whales and our school system. It just seems to take forever to turn them around. There are some people who just don't believe the public school system can be turned around.

But compare the way a blue whale turns around (slowly) with how a school of Sardines – which is the same or even greater mass than a blue whale — can almost turn instantly around. How do they do it?

The answer is simple. If you take a careful look at a school of sardines you will notice that although all the fish appear to be swimming in the same direction, at any one time, there will be a small group of sardines swimming in the opposite direction against the flow. As they swim in the opposite direction they create conflict, friction, and discomfort for the rest of the school.

But when a critical mass of truly committed sardines is reached – not a number like 50 percent to 80 percent of the school, but only 15 to 20 percent who are totally committed to a new direction – the rest of the school suddenly turns and goes with them, almost instantly!

Meaningful change begins with a small group of people truly committed to make meaningful change.

Making the Simulation Relevant

When briefing/debriefing the exercises, it's important for the Facilitator to understand the mapping of the simulation to the real world, or participants may struggle to relate the game to their own experience.

Simulation Element	Real World
Being eaten/removed from game	Threat (real or imagined)
Distance — static physical cohesion — via game rule (“Sardines must stay within limited distance of their neighbors”) Direction — dynamic physical cohesion — via game rule (“Sardines on periphery of school are at risk, inside are free from risk”)	Fear of deviation (belief in safety via behavioral conformance)
The starting location of the group (“safe coral reef”)	Status quo (e.g. current processes)
The goal location the group is instructed to reach (“area of yummy plankton”)	High performance (e.g. new process)
Distance deviation via game rule (“Committed Sardines may go farther from their neighbors”) Directional deviation via game rule (“Committed Sardines should go for the yummy plankton”)	Positive deviation in behavior/methods
Percentage cards and their instructions	The portion of group committed to change
Rules for “Committed Sardines” plus rules for “Sardines” leads group away from starting location toward goal location	A small group committed to change plus group fear of deviation leads away from Status Quo toward High Performance

Table 1: Mapping of simulation elements to real-world experience

Briefing and Debriefing

While the exercises should be enjoyable to play, the time spent on playing each should be less than the time spent on briefing/debriefing. It is especially important not to short-change the debriefing time, as this is where learners connect the cognitive and emotional experience of the exercise to their own real-world problems and experience.

The exercise is just a set-up for the debriefing. The debriefing is where the learning actually happens.

If you have a preferred briefing structure by all means use it. In lieu of one we recommend the “What - So What - What If - Now What” structure below.

Section	Purpose	Prompts
What Reflection	Allow for ‘venting’ of feelings; introduce learners to a process of self-reflection on the events that occurred in the exercise.	“What was that like?” “How did that feel?” “What happened first?” “What happened next?”
So What Interpretation	Refocus the learners’ reflections on their own experiences and the meanings they made from the exercise.	“Why did that happen?” “What were you thinking when that happened?” “What was the effect?”
What If Generalization	Take the learners from their experience with the exercise to the broader implications of that experience. Explore real-world possibilities implied by the experience.	“How is this like work/your situation?” “What if work was like this?” “Why do we/don’t we see similar things happening in our real life?”
Now What Application	Invite the learners to identify tangible actions and behavioral changes.	“What could you do about that?” “What would you need to start?”

Table 2: A possible debriefing structure

Whatever format you use, remember that without an effective debrief, a simulation is just recreation.

Good schooling to you!