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Lost in the Desert

It is approximately 10:00 am in mid-July and you have just crash landed in the Atacama Desert in South America. Your light twin-engine plane containing the bodies of the pilot and co-pilot has completely burned out with only the frame remaining. None of you have been injured.

The pilot was unable to notify anyone of your position before the crash. However, he had indicated before impact that you were 80 km from a mining camp, which is the nearest known settlement, and approximately 100 km off the course that was filed in your Flight Plan. The immediate area is quite flat, except for occasional cacti, and appears to be rather barren. The last weather report indicated that the temperature would reach 43°C today, which means that the temperature at ground level will be 54°C.

You are dressed in lightweight clothing, short-sleeved shirts, pants, socks, and street shoes. Everyone has a handkerchief and collectively, you have 3 packs of cigarettes and a ballpoint pen.

The Challenge

Before your plane caught fire, your group salvaged the 15 items listed on the “Salvaged Items” page.

**Task 1: Individual Task**

Rank the items on the list according to their importance to your survival, starting with “1” for the most important, to “15” for the least important.

**Step 2: Group Task**

Discuss your results with the rest of the team and rank the items on the list again within your group. You need to find an agreement for each item.

Further Info

* During hot weather, walk through the desert slowly. Rest for 10 minutes every hour. Begin early in the morning or later in the day.
* In the summer, ground temperatures can be 10 degrees hotter than air temperature so try to sit at least 30 cm above the ground if possible.
* Water sources can be located by digging 1-1.5 m at the outside edge of a sharp bend in a dry streambed. Animal paths and flocks of birds also may lead to water.
* Cactus fruit and flowers may be eaten. Split open the base of cactus stalks and chew the pith (but don’t swallow it). This can alleviate thirst.

List of Salvaged Items

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Item** | **My Ranking** | **Team Ranking** | **Answer** | **My Error 1-2** | **Team Error 2-3** |
| 1 Torch with 4 battery cells |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Folding knife |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Air map of area |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Plastic raincoat (large size) |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5. Magnetic compass |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6. First-aid kit |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7. 45-calibre pistol (loaded) |  |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Parachute (red & white) |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9. Bottle of 1000 salt tablets |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10. 2 litres of water per person |  |  |  |  |  |
| 11. A book entitled ‘Desert Animals  That Can Be Eaten’ |  |  |  |  |  |
| 12. Sunglasses (for everyone) |  |  |  |  |  |
| 13. 2 litres of vodka |  |  |  |  |  |
| 14. Overcoat (for everyone) |  |  |  |  |  |
| 15. A cosmetic mirror |  |  |  |  |  |
| SCORE |  |  |  |  |  |

Teaching Note

**Background and Aim:**

The desert game is a classic group communication and decision-making exercise. It is about group dynamics and team building. Students will experience that consensus can be hard to reach. An important outcome of this exercise can be that students become aware that sometimes a bit of give and take is necessary in order to move forward to a solution.

The aim of the exercise is heightening awareness of communication and decision-making processes, rather than over emphasis on “getting the answers exactly right”. Display of this need is a point of observation and one worthy of a debrief.

**Instructions:**

* Spilt your class into groups of max. 5 students.
* Choose 2-3 observers (depending on the size of the class).
* Hand out the instructions for students and the list of items.
* Students should first rank the items individually and, in a second step, discuss their results with the rest of the group and rank the items again together.
* Encourage groups to complete the task without the use of tactics such as voting, trading in, or averaging.
* The observers should watch the groups and take notes regarding the group dynamic, decision-making processes, roles within the teams, etc.
* Very important: debriefing with the whole class! Observers share their notes with the class. The groups should also self-reflect the communication and decision-making process within their groups. The questions below can be taken up throughout the discussion.
* Show students the ideal ranking below. In fact, there is no true or false in this game, like many decision situations at work or in daily life. It is about finding convincing and plausible arguments for why a certain item should be ranked high or low, and about achieving a consensus.

**Questions for Debriefing:**

* Did participants avoid conflict or change their minds simply to come to agreement?
* How were decisions made?
* Who influenced the decisions and how?
* How could better decisions have been made?
* Did people listen to each other? if not, why not?
* What roles did group members adopt?
* How was conflict managed?
* What kinds of behaviour helped or hindered the group?
* How did people feel about the decisions? Were they satisfied?
* What have you learned about the functioning of this group?
* How would you do the activity differently if you were asked to do it again?
* What situations at work/home/school do you think are like this exercise?

Ideal Ranking

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Item** | **Rank** | **Rationale** |
| 1 Torch with 4 battery cells | 4 | Essential for night time use |
| 2. Folding knife | 6 | For cutting rope, food, etc. |
| 3. Aerial map of area | 12 | To have idea on present location |
| 4. Plastic raincoat (large size) | 7 | To collect dew overnight |
| 5. Magnetic compass | 11 | Since awaiting rescue, this isn’t of much other use |
| 6. First-aid kit | 10 | Everybody is safe at present |
| 7. 45-calibre pistol (loaded) | 8 | For defence, three shots from a gun is also a recognised distress signal. |
| 8. Parachute (red & white) | 5 | Use as tent |
| 9. Bottle of 1000 salt tablets | 15 | Of no use in desert |
| 10. 2 litres of water per person | 3 | For drinking, a person requires a gallon of water per day in the desert. |
| 11. A book entitled “Desert Animals  That Can Be Eaten” | 13 | Food is less important than water in the desert as digestion consumes water. |
| 12. Sunglasses (for everyone) | 9 | Protection against glare |
| 13. 2 litres of vodka | 14 | Useful as an antiseptic only as alcohol causes dehydration |
| 14. Overcoat (for everyone) | 2 | Essential protection in desert, clothing helps ration sweat by slowing evaporation and prolonging the cooling effect. |
| 15. A cosmetic mirror | 1 | Means of visual signalling |