

**SPONT
ANEOUS
BUILDING
CREATIVE
THINKERS**



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Odyssey of the Mind® 

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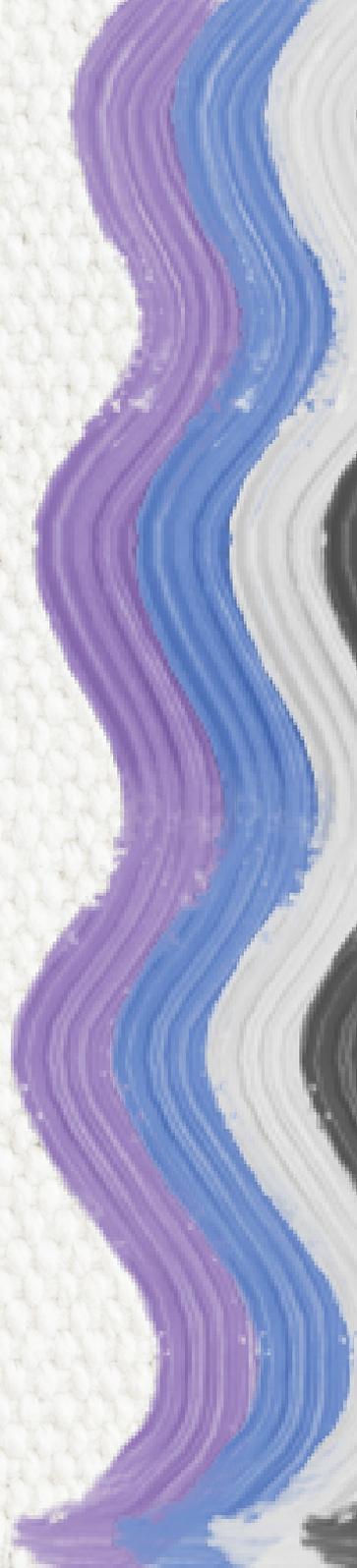
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INTRODUCTION

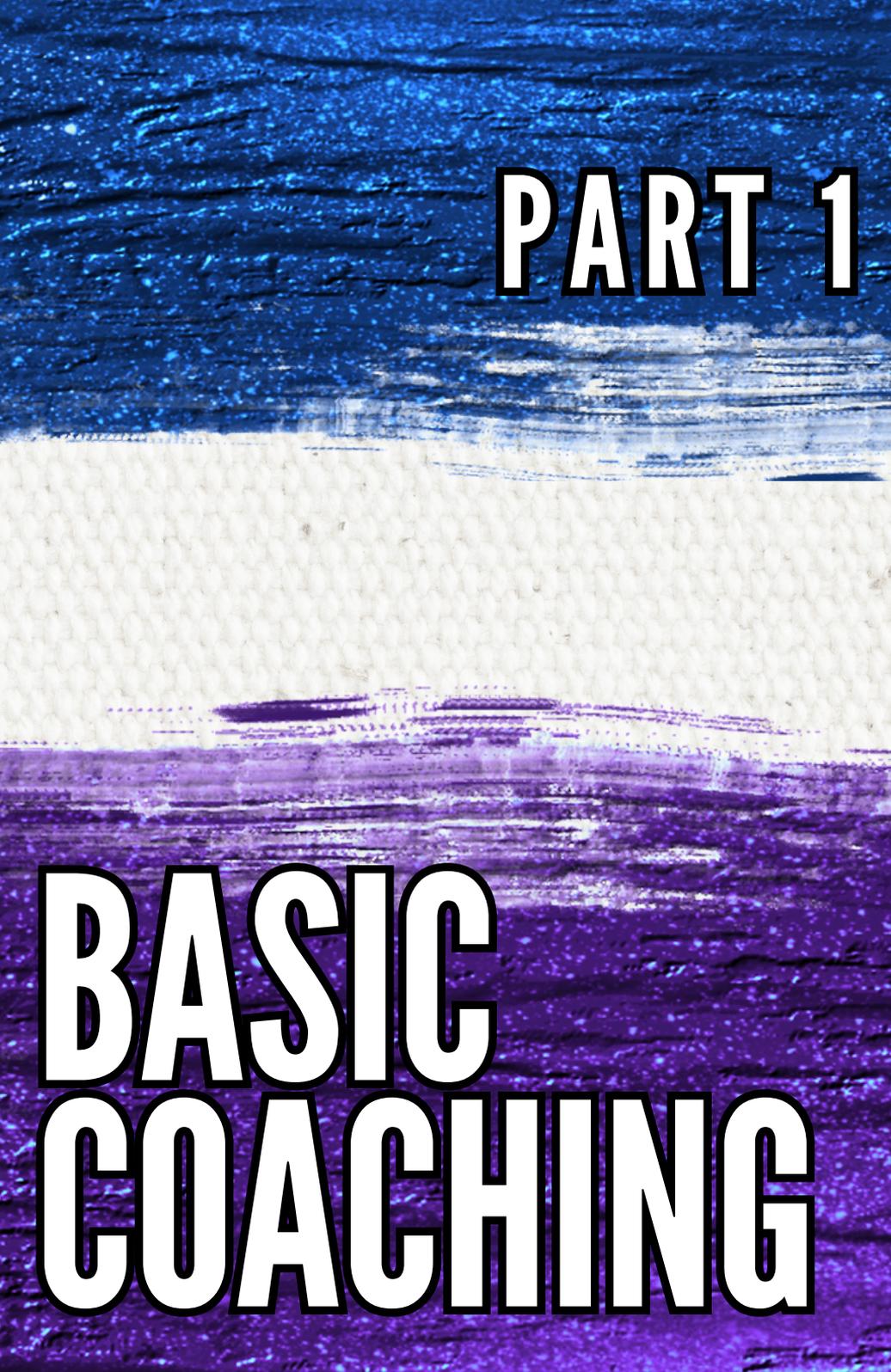
'DISMISS THOUGHTS OF 'GOOD, BAD, RIGHT, WRONG, SUCCESS, FAILURE' - BE SPONTANEOUS.'

Spontaneous problems are the secret sauce of Odyssey of the Mind. While Long-Term problems showcase months of creative engineering, storytelling, and teamwork, Spontaneous challenges test a team's quick thinking, communication, and creativity...on the spot. Think about your day to day...how many times are you faced with a challenge and little time to solve it? Probably a lot.

This eBook is designed to help coaches and teams build confidence and skills in Spontaneous through regular, meaningful practice. Inside, you'll find simplified problems, coaching strategies, and brainstorming techniques to spark creativity and fun. But this is a starting point. See which strategies work for your team. You know them best!

Team...BEGIN!





PART 1

**BASIC
COACHING**



‘YES, AND...AND...AND?’

THE ART OF SPONTANEOUS COACHING

“THE DELICATE BALANCE OF MENTORING SOMEONE IS NOT CREATING THEM IN YOUR OWN IMAGE, BUT GIVING THEM THE OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE THEMSELVES.”

Being an Odyssey of the Mind coach during spontaneous practice is a bit like being a game show host, life coach, and cat wrangler all at once. Your job isn't to give answers—tempting as that is when they're describing a jellyfish as “a stabby sea sock”, but to guide your team to think fast, take risks, and build confidence in their quirky brilliance.

You run drills, throw curveballs, cheer for wildly creative answers, and occasionally remind them that “spatula” is not the solution to every problem. It's messy, unpredictable, and absolutely where the magic happens.





ORGANIZING THOUGHTS

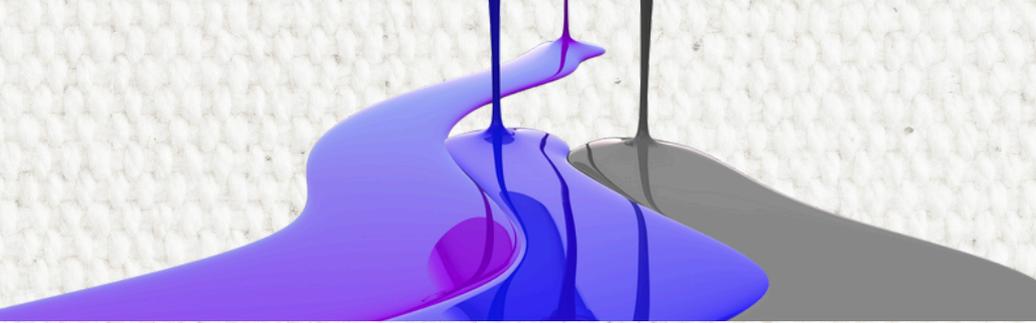
IT'S HARD...BUT ITS GOTTA HAPPEN.

Why: Most teams approach spontaneous like a squirrel on espresso: pure enthusiasm, zero direction.

Coach Actions

- **Designate a Leader (a.k.a. "Cat Wrangler")**
 - Pick someone to keep the team moving forward, the one who can say "Great, now let's do it" without starting a mutiny. Take turns.
- **"It's always the quiet ones..."**
 - Never underestimate the kid who hasn't said a word in 20 minutes. Encourage inclusion.
 - Create space for those quiet thinkers. Give moments of silence and celebrate when they drop a brilliant solution.
- **Use Whiteboards or Paper (Actual Brain Storage)**
 - Having something to write on helps the team remember ideas longer than a goldfish does.
- **Pick an Idea. Seriously. Pick One.**
 - Practice the fine art of deciding something, even if it's not the most perfect unicorn of an idea.

Ask the team - Did you spend too much time looking for the perfect solution...or did you try a few solutions?



BRAINSTORMING BASELINE

BEFORE YOU RUN, DON'T FORGET STRETCH.

Why: Breaking bad habits and creating good ones leads to the next big idea.

Coach Actions

- **Pass the hot potato**
 - Each person gives one idea. Then go around again. No monologues, no debates, just a quick-fire idea buffet.
- **“Yes, And...” The Improv Superpower**
 - Instead of “No, that won’t work,” try “Yes, and let’s make it out of paper clips!”
 - Keep energy up. Bonus: less yelling, more laughter.
- **Category Twist: Plot Twist, But Make It Crafty**
 - What if that idea had to work underwater? In zero gravity? In ancient Egypt?
 - Suddenly that boring box becomes a legendary pyramid... or a submarine... or both.

Ask the team - Did you spend too much time looking for the perfect solution.? How many solutions did you try?



PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

APPLY WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED.

What If...?

Prompt: What if shoes could talk? What would they say, or what would happen?

Coaching Tip: Ask them to think of different types of shoes or who the shoes belong to to spark different ideas.

Say It Another Way

Prompt: Say something that means “I’m tired” without using those exact words.

Coaching Tip: Help teams brainstorm categories like animals, weather, or machines to inspire metaphors.

If I Had a Superpower

Prompt: If you had the superpower of talking to animals, what would you do with it?

Coaching Tip: Encourage them to think about helping others, saving the world, or understanding animal emotions.

Finish the Phrase

Prompt: Complete this phrase in as many creative ways as possible: “It’s raining, so...”

Coaching Tip: Ask them to think about different settings—school, space, underwater—and how rain would change things.

PART 2

**LESS
BASIC
COACHING**



THE BENEFIT OF LIMITS

SOUNDS COUNTERINTUITIVE...IT WORKS.

Setting limits during Odyssey of the Mind spontaneous practice is absolutely essential, otherwise, you're just hosting a 20-minute improv session featuring glitter, shouting, and increasingly questionable uses for duct tape.

Boundaries like **time**, **materials**, and **who can talk** and omitting responses in some categories seem like buzzkills, but they're actually the secret sauce that keeps the chaos deliciously creative instead of just... chaotic.

When kids learn to think inside the box (because the box has a 5-minute timer and only contains three ping pong balls and a hanky), they start pulling off genius moves under pressure. It's not about crushing their creativity—it's about giving it a stage, a spotlight, and a strict time limit before the buzzer goes off.





IMPOSE TIME LIMITS AND OCCASIONALLY CHANGE IT UP.

Why: Time pressure forces rapid decision-making, prioritization, and teamwork, key components of success in spontaneous.

Coach Actions

- **Use a timer every time.**
 - Make time tracking part of every practice so teams internalize pacing. Use your phone, a classroom timer, or an online countdown tool.
- **Break it down.**
 - 1 minute for silent idea generation
 - 1 minute for team discussion/planning
 - 5 minutes for solution
- **Enforce cutoff discipline.**
 - Stop the activity firmly at the end of the time—even if they're not done. This mimics tournament conditions.
- **Vary the time.**
 - "Sprint" 30 seconds prep, 2 minutes solve)
 - "Marathon" (3 minutes prep, 8 minutes solve) to practice endurance and sustained collaboration.

Ask the team: What could you have done with one more minute? What could you have done to save time?



MATERIALS LIMITS

USE WHATEVER IS LYING AROUND.

Why: Physical restrictions push creative engineering, teamwork, and novel problem-solving.

Coach Actions

- **Create a “Mystery Box.”**
 - Each practice, fill a small box with different, random supplies. Tell teams they must solve today’s challenge using only what’s in the box.
- **Mix up the constraints.**
 - “You get only 2 types of materials”
 - “You must use at least one of everything provided”
 - “One team member can’t touch any materials”
- **Impose scarcity.**
 - “You only get 10 inches of tape—measure and cut carefully.”
 - “You can use ONE paperclip... total.”
- **Bonus creativity twist.**
 - Give teams materials that don’t obviously belong together, and ask them to make something that works **and** looks cool.

Ask the team - What was their “favorite use of a random material” during a team debrief. Why?



IDEA LIMITS

SIMPLIFY THEN RESPOND.

Why: Removing easy categories forces deeper thinking and unexpected associations.

Coach Actions

- **Ban “easy outs.”**
 - “No animals allowed in your answers today.”
 - “Nothing that flies.”
- **Use a random spinner or dice. Before the round, let the team roll a constraint.**
 - Only adjectives
 - Only things you’d find in a garage
 - Only things that make noise but aren’t musical instruments
- **Category shuffling:**
 - During verbal problems, tell the team they must use only one category: e.g., “Your answers must be related to weather.”
- **Forced creativity challenge:**
 - Give a list of banned words before a verbal round
 - Or: “No repeating a word that’s already been used

Ask the team - Pick their own constraints, either for the team or let individuals pick their own.



PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

APPLY WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED.

Change the Ending

Prompt: Name a well-known story, fairy tale, or movie—and change its ending in a funny or surprising way.

Coaching Tip: Encourage use of teamwork by having one person name a story and others build on the twist.

Invention Confusion

Prompt: Name something that was accidentally invented—and then say what else it could accidentally be used for. (Example: Bubble wrap used as a musical instrument.)

Coaching Tip: Encourage thinking about texture, shape, or how something sounds/feels to spark ideas.

The World's Worst...

Prompt: Name something a person should not do if they want to be the best _____ (fill in blank with a job like "chef," "teacher," or "zookeeper").

Coaching Tip: Let team members pick a job category to focus on for a round, then switch it up.

PART 3

**NOT SO
BASIC
COACHING**



ALWAYS A BALANCING ACT. NOT JUST THE TOWER...THE PERSONALITIES TOO.

Hands-on spontaneous is where brilliance meets toothpicks. It's the moment your team is handed a pile of mismatched materials, a weirdly specific challenge, and five minutes to make something that (mostly) works. It's messy, frantic, and occasionally (mostly) stuck to a table, but it's also where some of the best team magic happens. Nothing bonds a group faster than trying to balance a marshmallow on a spaghetti bridge while yelling (mostly) encouraging things at each other.

Teams learn to trust their instincts, trust each other, and discover that cardboard and creativity go a long way. It's a crash course in problem solving under pressure, teamwork, and making peace.

And let's be honest, it's fun. Even when it goes completely off the rails, hands-on spontaneous gives kids a space to laugh, learn, and try again. It's where failing gloriously is still a win and where every noodle-and-cup contraption is a step closer to becoming a more fearless thinker.



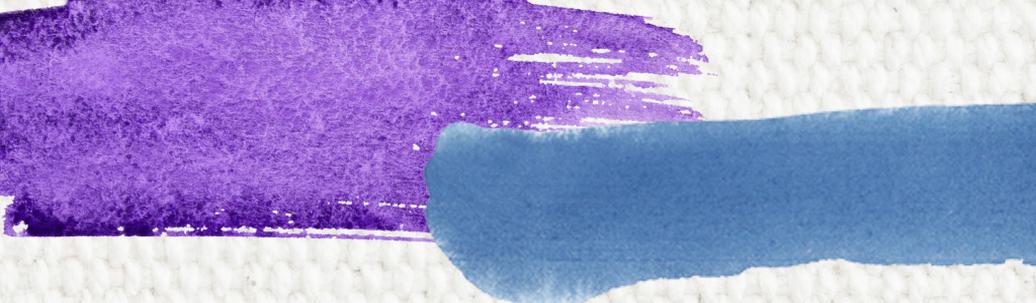
PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

FAILURE IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

Why: Even advanced teams lose time overplanning. Use practice time to find strategies the team can implement.

Coach Actions

- **Quick Prototyping with a simple prompt**
 - Let them build and experiment. Don't time it.
 - Start with sketches based the materials provided.
 - Do mock ups and verbally describe the process.
 - Don't forget the fun.
- **Limits - Take 2**
 - Introduce intentional scarcity - make the materials they have more valuable.
 - Practice with fragile materials. The more breakable the better. Spaghetti, anyone?
- **Go through the motions again and again**
 - Keep practicing with materials over and over.
 - Get used to the different ways materials behave. Fishing line, yarn and twine are kinda the same and kind of knot (get it).
 - Let the team play. Half the fun is watching the creation fall. That's were the learning happens.



HAND-ON ISN'T ALWAYS

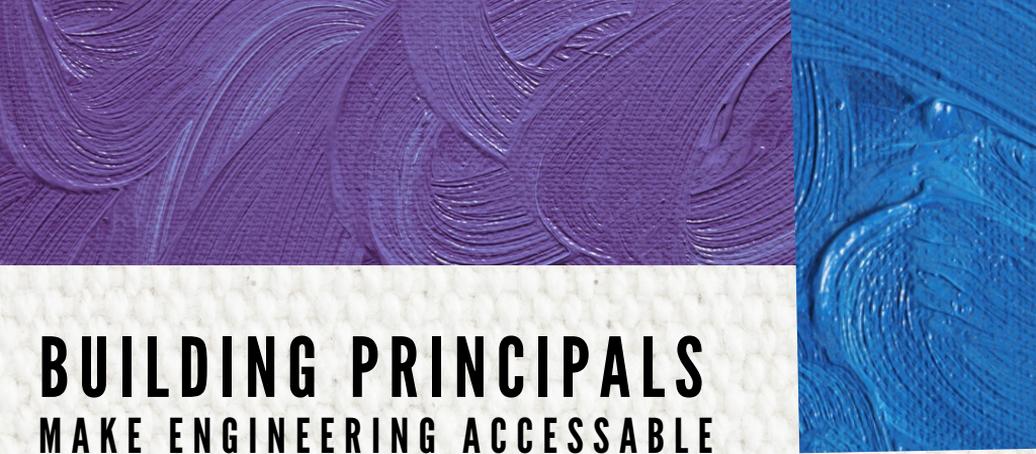
HOW TO MANAGE THE CRAZIENSS

Why: Don't confuse 'teamwork' with everyone is doing all the things all the time. Chaos can breed confusion. Judges love a well oiled team.

Coach Actions

- **Assign roles - Rotate Roles. For example...**
 - Planner – organizes the approach.
 - Timer – keeps an eye on the clock.
 - Builder – gets hands-on with materials.
 - Fixer – manages repairs/improvements.
- By rotating these, **all team members** become multi-functional, improving adaptability and capability.
- **Encourage parallel building**
 - Split the team into two mini-teams to test two designs simultaneously, then merge the best parts.
 - This speeds up iteration and mimics a real-world prototyping process.





BUILDING PRINCIPALS

MAKE ENGINEERING ACCESSABLE

Why: Leveling up the hands-on performance takes knowledge and skills. All of them can be learned.

Coach Actions

- **Impart wisdom without an degree**
 - Teach the basics of physics and engineering
 - Compression v. Tension? Strongest shape?
 - What is load distribution? Center of gravity?
 - Why does stuff stay standing?!
- Search out resources. We like this one from 'Scientists in School.'
- **Break out the timer**
 - Put on the pressure. Planning time. Building time. Testing time.
 - Track time improvements on the same problems.
- **Change it up!**
 - Don't let them get comfortable. Toss in a variable.
 - One team member can't talk. No tape. Change the time without warning. Use *your* imagination.
 - Variable build resiliency and adaptability.



BUILDING AWARENESS

ITS HOW WE ALL GET BETTER

Why: Awareness of surrounding. Awareness of self. Awareness of emotions. Critical life skills learned here.

Coach Actions

- **“Lets go to the video tape”**
 - Record spontaneous practice sessions
 - Who was leading?
 - Did everyone participate?
 - When did they stall or succeed?
 - Were their ideas tested or just discussed?
- **Where are the points?**
 - Identify where the points are coming from, prioritize accordingly.
 - Lots of teamwork points? Better to go high or better to be stable and support an object?
- **Keep an eye out for distractions**
 - Are the materials useful? Ask teams what was useful and what wasn't...then challenge them to find a use.



PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

APPLY WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

Practicing hands on spontaneous can seem a bit overwhelming at first. There is a lot happening. There is a lot to consider. There is a lot that team might not know how to do. **Start simple.**

Grab whatever you have lying around. Ask the team to build a tower or a bridge. Ask them to see how high it can get. Ask them how they felt afterward. Make sure the emphasis is on teamwork and respecting each other through the process. During practice, the height of the thing is not the aim. The aim is instilling in teams the the core values of collaboration.

And when you are ready...

GIVE THESE PRACTICE PROBLEMS A SHOT!



So here we are...

If by now your team has laughed, puzzled, built a questionable contraption out of pipe cleaners and blind optimism, and said "Wait... is that even allowed?" then, congratulations, **you're doing it right.**

Spontaneous isn't about perfection. It's about possibility. It's where kids learn to trust their instincts, listen to each other, and take bold leaps, sometimes off a popsicle stick bridge. As a coach, your role isn't to have the answers (though duct tape might be one). It's to guide, encourage, and step back just enough to let brilliance bubble up through the chaos.

So keep those random objects handy, those brains buzzing, and remember: the real magic isn't in solving the problem. It's in discovering just how many ways you can. Now go forth and be spontaneous, with joy, with heart, and maybe with a stopwatch.

YOU'VE GOT THIS.

YOUR TEAM HAS GOT THIS.

