

FAQs and Resources: *Using Carrots and Sticks to Promote Student Collaboration and Enhance the Team Experience*

Compiled by Sophia Marshall and Elaine Viccora, School of Business

What do you mean by carrots and sticks? Carrots are our way of describing icebreaker and/or team-building activities that motivate and incentivize students to work together while “sticks” refer to the tools and strategies used to promote accountability.

Why focus on team collaboration in your class? Collaboration encourages our students to learn from each other, be more creative, and use time efficiently. Most professors hope that their assignments help students develop the [important teamwork skills](#) needed to succeed at school and the workplace.* However, students don’t automatically learn those skills from team assignments. By using carrots and sticks, you create experiential opportunities for students to develop key teamwork skills/knowledge.

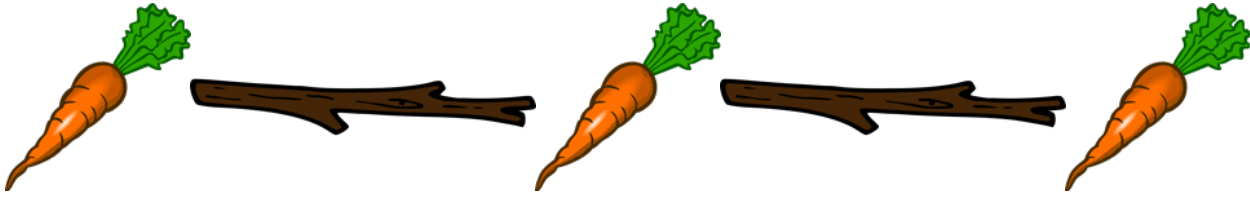
When should “carrots” be used? In the first few weeks of the semester, we like to use short icebreaker activities to encourage a collaborative class culture and prepare students for future teamwork. We recommend that you schedule team-building activities *before* you share instructions for the team assignment to ensure students pay attention to their initial team development; once the assignment instructions are available, students immediately focus on the assignment’s tasks and are less interested in team-building efforts.

Which team-building or ice breaker activities should you use? Remember to select the activity based upon your goal. Do you want to foster a *collaborative culture* within the class? Incorporate paired or small group discussions at the beginning of the semester to discuss low-risk topics (e.g., pet peeves or common experiences). *Build community*? Give shout-outs to acknowledge student birthdays or offer praise to someone who exhibits collegial behavior. Do you want to *promote team cohesion*? Introduce tasks that require teams to collaborate (e.g., 24-piece puzzle, word problem, or treasure hunt) and gamify it. Review these lists of activities that can be adapted for your class: [funny icebreaker questions](#), [virtual activities](#); [face-to-face activities](#); and [37 team-building activities](#).

If there’s a gamified activity, does there have to be a prize?

It’s fun to offer prizes on occasion, but don’t do it initially or you’ll create an expectation that prizes will be awarded each time. Offer a class-related incentive (e.g., first choice when students/teams select a topic or a “free pass” for 24-hour extension on homework); more traditional prizes (e.g., candy); or an experience (e.g., coffee with the professor).

*See reports by the [Center on Education and the Workforce](#) and HR association [SHRM](#).



How do you modify carrots (or sticks) for an asynchronous class? The Stearns Center provides great tips for how to [organize and promote group work online](#). We've had success with structuring activities so asynchronous students are interacting in smaller groups vs. the full class (e.g., set up activity as a *Group Discussion Board* on Blackboard). To get to know classmates, students may post video or audio introductions; photos of something meaningful in their workspace and provide a written or recorded explanation of its importance; or stories recounting past experiences in both effective groups and the "group from hell."

What type of team roles can be suggested to students?

Designated roles promote accountability and maximize collaboration. The work of Dr. Belbin outlines [nine group roles](#) that focus on task-oriented and people-oriented functions. Students can use this resource to help them develop roles that best fit the needs of their group and the assignment.

What are good journal prompts?

Good journal prompts encourage students to reflect on their role and the team's functioning. A few examples include:

- Discuss your personal goal for this project.
- What have you contributed this week to your team?
- What are your plans for helping your team boost communication skills this week?
- If you were to engage with this team again, what would you do differently?
- Are you happy with your team's finished product? Explain your answer.

Which topics should teams discuss when drafting their team charter?

Teams should begin by interpreting the expectations of the assignment. They also can consider what they've learned about each other during the pre-project phase. We use charter templates that guide students through discussions about team roles, communication expectations, meeting times/format, ways to avoid common team issues, and workload distribution.

What are good questions to ask during the periodic team check-ins?

- Share an insight that you've learned this week.
- Did you reach your goals with this project this week? Why/why not?

Questions?

Contact Sophia at smarsha@gmu.edu or Elaine at eviccora@gmu.edu