



## The Electric Maze

**“The Electric Maze is the best action learning device I have seen. In a few hours participants learn more about effective teamwork and problem solving than they could learn in a week of lectures – and they retain it because they figured it out themselves. I have never seen this process or the device itself misfire.”**

- Gifford Pinchot, Intrapreneuring In Action

### What Is The Maze?

The Maze is a highly motivating learning device that consists of a grid and a control module. The grid is a flexible carpeted mat that is divided into 54 squares. Some squares have pressure sensitive switches. If the square is activated, and if someone steps on it, the maze alarm sounds.

### What Is The Maze Used For?

#### Teambuilding, Training and Testing

Teambuilding activities with The Maze improve the performance, productivity, and cohesiveness of the team. The team is given a challenge involving The Maze. Team members attempt to achieve a goal (for example, getting everyone across the maze) within specific constraints (for example, without talking to each other, within ten minutes). The specifics of each session are tailored to the overall objective of the client.

In the process, they try out various decision-making and communication strategies and learn about teamwork. Participant's progress from defensiveness to trust and discover how the team can achieve more than a collection of individuals. Using The Maze as a metaphor, team members identify and implement new strategies to improve their performance.

### A Typical Session

To the uninitiated, it is a strange sight. Twenty executive men and women are gathered around a 6 foot by 9 foot, checker-board patterned carpet. The intensity is palpable. The group is utilizing a communication system that is part grunts, part hand signals, part gestures, and part clap-ping. One thing is clear -the challenge captivates them. The group is searching for a path through the Electric Maze.

After 10 minutes of strategic planning, verbal communication is no longer allowed. Getting themselves to the other end of the maze represents their collective vision. The group has been told that while there is at least one continuous, safe path through the maze, the maze is also full of squares that beep, signaling that the team is off-route.

The Electric Maze has three primary levels of performance feedback built in:

- Financial results
- Speed,
- Quality

The entire team (organization) loses money anytime anyone steps on a beep that has previously been discovered (rework). Secondly, there is a narrow window of opportunity – time limits are set, performance must happen. Lastly, at the end of the exercise, the group evaluates the quality of its performance by a set of norms that they established in an earlier session.

One at a time, team members step out onto the carpet and seek to extend the group's forward progress through the maze, which is an error-making and error-correcting process. Since the territory is unknown when the exercise begins, productive mistakes (first time beeps) are essential and valuable information.

The team's success is dependent upon quickly assimilating the emerging information into a collective intelligence of the whole system. Eight minutes into the exercise and despite the 10 minutes of planning, the team is rattled. Its original strategy doesn't seem to be working. As the information being discovered becomes more complex, the group's system is proving to be too rigidly functional, cumbersome, and overly complicated. The group is unfocused. Losing time and money, the group is in crisis.

Sixteen minutes of experimenting with the Electric Maze, the group begins to shed its original bureaucratic system. Increasingly, set-backs are rare. Artificial barriers between people disappear. Innovative ideas are utilized quickly. After 20 minutes, the first person is safely through the maze amidst wild applause and cheers, but quickly the group refocuses, queues up holding hands, and within a short period all 20 participants are through the maze, backslapping and high-fiving.

Following the spontaneous celebration, the group surrounds the maze to analyze their results according to the criteria of money, efficiency, and quality. Unlike a classroom discussion about self-directed or high-performing business teams, the participants in the Electric Maze have just practiced these concepts. Rather than reading a book, watching a training video, or listening to a presentation on self-managed teams, they have just created a self-managed team (albeit in a simplified situation and for a brief period of time).

Following some time to reflect in their individual journals, the group collectively looks back upon the action-learning experience for its lessons. In discussing their experience, the participants identify some key principles of team learning.

**Becoming a self-managing “learning team” cannot be taught. It can, however, be learned.**

Through an incremental process such as the Electric Maze, participating teams would begin to develop the necessary skills and habits, as well as insights into organizational learning necessary to face the “turbulence” and challenges inherent in today's global environment and information-service age.