Kindergartners Out-Build MBAs

Idea In Short

A simple team exercise, building the tallest possible structure out of dry spaghetti, tape, string and a single marshmallow, consistently produces a striking result:

> young children often outperform master of business administration [MBA] students and senior executives

The reason has little to do with engineering skill and everything to do with how each group spends its limited time. Teams that prototype early and revise often beat teams that plan first and build once.

A simple exercise with a consistent result

A well-known team exercise asks small groups to build the tallest freestanding structure they can, using nothing more than dry spaghetti, tape and string, with a marshmallow balanced on top as the final test of stability. Facilitators who have run this exercise repeatedly across executives, students and consultants report a strikingly consistent outcome:

> teams of young children, on average, build sturdier and taller structures than teams of MBA students.1

Why prototyping beats planning

The task rewards experimentation over planning. Children approach the challenge by building something quickly, seeing what fails and adjusting immediately, cycling through several rough versions before time runs out. MBA teams, by contrast, often spend a disproportionate share of their limited time negotiating who leads the group and sketching an ambitious final design on paper, only to run out of time before ever testing whether that design actually holds a marshmallow's weight.

What senior teams get right, and wrong

A few additional patterns show up consistently across repeated runs of this exercise. Teams that included an executive assistant alongside senior leaders performed noticeably better than teams made up entirely of executives, likely because the assistant's presence shifted the group toward practical execution rather than status negotiation. Financial incentives, somewhat counterintuitively, made performance worse rather than better, adding pressure that pushed teams toward cautious planning instead of fast iteration. And when the same teams repeated the exercise months later, nearly all of them improved, suggesting the underlying lesson genuinely sticks once experienced firsthand.

The debrief matters as much as the exercise

Running the exercise without a structured debrief afterward leaves much of its value on the table. A short set of questions afterward helps a group actually absorb the lesson:

> what worked and did not work, how the team's internal dynamics shaped the outcome and what the team would change if given another attempt

Reinforcing the exercise with a short recorded talk on the same theme helps solidify the takeaway for participants who learn better by hearing the idea explained a second time.2

Applying the lesson beyond a workshop

The underlying insight travels well beyond a team-building exercise. Organizations that insist on a fully planned, polished approach before testing anything in the real world often

discover, too late, that their untested design does not hold up under real conditions. Teams willing to build a rough version early, deliberately treating it as disposable, tend to reach a stronger final outcome by the time a real deadline arrives.3

A useful reminder for senior leaders

Perhaps the most humbling part of this exercise for experienced professionals is watching a team of young children solve, through instinct alone, a problem that a room full of credentialed adults spent most of their allotted time debating rather than testing. That gap is worth revisiting the next time a team feels tempted to perfect a plan before ever putting a rough version in front of reality.

- 1Marshmallow Challenge
- 2Prototype
- 3Rapid Prototyping

Summary

Kindergartners consistently out-build MBA students and executives on a simple spaghetti-and-marshmallow tower challenge, not because they know more, but because they prototype early instead of planning first. Business teams that treat early drafts as disposable experiments, rather than delaying action until a design feels finished, tend to reach a stronger outcome by the time the clock runs out.