

Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan
and TRACY TAGLIATI

Jolts!

**Activities to
WAKE UP and
ENGAGE
Your Participants**

About This Book

Why is this topic important?

Everyone knows that experiential activities are the best tools to engage your participants in training sessions and meetings. But there is a problem: These activities take a long time to design and facilitate. This book provides an elegant solution: Use *jolts* that can be conducted in a few minutes and give a long-lasting wake-up call and powerful insights.

What can you achieve with this book?

This book first provides a rationale for using jolts and a caveat against their abuse. It gives practical guidelines to achieve a variety of results such as capturing participants' attention at the beginning of a session, smoothly transitioning between one training topic (or agenda item) and the next, keeping participants awake and energized after a lunch break, tapping into the wisdom of the group to derive profound insights, and breaking up lengthy lectures and information dumps with relevant activities. In short, the book helps the reader to design, deliver, and debrief engaging jolts.

How is this book organized?

The book is divided into two distinct sections. Part 1 provides a conceptual introduction to jolts and practical guidelines for conducting different types of jolts with different groups of participants. This part also contains a comprehensive why-to and how-to section on debriefing after a jolt to reflect on the activity, derive useful insights, and share them with each other. Part 2 features the bulk of the content in the form of fifty ready-to-use jolts. Each jolt is presented in a standardized format that includes a synopsis, statement of purpose, appropriate training topics, number of participants, time requirement, supplies and equipment, step-by-step instructions for conducting the activity, debriefing questions and suggestions, learning points, variations, and field notes.

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JOLTS!

Activities to Wake Up and Engage Your Participants

Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan

Tracy Tagliati

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In fond memory of our friend
Juliet

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On the Website

Electronic copies of the slides, handouts, and audio recordings for these jolts are provided on the website for this book at:

url: www.pfeiffer.com/go/jolts

password: professional

Slides

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Preface

Thiagi designed his first training game (for a high school physics lesson on internal combustion engines) in 1960, long before his co-author Tracy was born. Since then Thiagi has developed hundreds of different types of games, simulations, and learning activities, and this passion has defined his career. His love for and belief in the power of experiential learning has made him a sought after teacher who travels the world sharing his knowledge with other designers and trainers. In fact, Thiagi may hold the record for game design; he has made a point to design a new training game each day since 1998. Ever mindful of changing times (and perhaps because of his younger colleagues with low attention spans), Thiagi has been compressing the time requirements for his learning activities over the last ten years and focused his inspiration on the design and use of jolts, the subject of this book.

Tracy joined the Thiagi gamesters after spending her developmental years as a global nomad, finally settling in California and teaching vocational education to young adults. After a stint in the corporate training world (first at a franchise of Crestcom International and then at Mercury Insurance Group), Tracy joined the Thiagi Group in 2008 and began working with Thiagi co-designing, co-facilitating, and co-authoring jolts. She says her current specialty is arguing with Thiagi.

The jolts presented in this book are field tested. Some of the activities have been featured as part of sessions on designing and using jolts at professional conferences such as the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), the International Alliance for Learning (IAL), the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI), and the North American Simulation and Gaming Association (NASAGA). Jointly and separately, we have incorporated jolts in our training workshops around the world from Cape Town to Chennai, from Johannesburg to Paris, from Singapore and Sydney and Zurich to Rancho Cucamonga.

In every session and in every country we have visited, jolts have enabled us to achieve two valuable outcomes: We have kept our participants engaged in the learning and provided them with useful and sometimes profound insights (no matter the native culture or background of the participants).

The step-by-step procedures and supporting principles outlined in this book put the power of experiential learning in your hands and as a result the potential to create a more engaged, energized, and high performing workforce.

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PART 1

What Jolts Are and How to Use Them

Chapter 1

What Are Jolts and How Can I Use Them?

As the definition of the word implies, *Jolts* are brief activities that challenge (and maybe push, jar, and sometimes shock) participants to re-examine their comfortable assumptions and habitual practices (see definition below).

Jolt

- 1 to cause to move with a sudden jerky motion
- 2 to give a knock or blow to; specifically: to jar with a quick or hard blow
- 3 a: to disturb the composure of: shock; b: to interfere with roughly, abruptly, and disconcertingly

While not directly aimed at skill building, the fifty *Jolts* we describe in this book are nonetheless powerful training tools that will help you engage your participants and focus attention on your learning event. In addition, *Jolts* are perfectly suited for use in many types of training interventions, including training in diversity, sexual harassment, change management, customer focus, and creative problem solving. Here are a few other suggestions on how to use these activities. You may use *Jolts* to

- Capture participants' attention at the beginning of a session
- Segue between one training topic and the next
- Keep participants awake and energized after a lunch break
- Make a profound, thought-provoking point at the end of another activity (for example, to demonstrate the difficulty of making changes in behaviors and habits)
- Vary the pace and break up lengthy presentations such as presentations of technical content
- Anchor a lecture by choosing an appropriate *jolt* that will allow you to present your content as part of the *jolt* debriefing
- Illustrate effective learning techniques or emphasize the importance of follow-up activities

Conducting Jolts

Skilled facilitation is essential to the success of jolts since some of these activities require participants to examine differences between people and cultures as well as preconceived notions connected directly to potential emotion “hot buttons” issues. Other activities are simply fast paced and highly competitive so keeping emotions in check requires the finesse of an experienced facilitator. This is particularly true during the debrief portion (see Chapter 6) of the activity when strong emotions or negative reactions often surface. That is why we offer specific detailed instructions and appropriate warnings about the use of these exercises.

In the next chapter you will find a scenario of a jolt exercise that will be useful to your full understanding of jolts. But first you’ll need the grounding provided by the rest of this chapter so that the principles are clearly understood.

The Types and Categories of Jolts

Jolts are broadly classified into two categories, *entrapment* jolts and *enlightenment* jolts. As you might imagine, both types present unique facilitation challenges. Jolts are designed to be used with individual participants or groups and either nudge, push, or perhaps force participants to consider new ways to thinking or behaving, thus our cautions about use and the careful instructions provided in this book. We have designed the jolts to employ a variety of media prompts that increase the effectiveness of the jolts, including the use of printed cards and audio and video clips. Some of the jolts do require simple props for successful execution, but we have deliberately limited the number of jolts requiring props to simplify facilitation. Finally, we vary the required tasks to take advantage of a wide range of individual preferences and learner types. You will find exercises involving listening and thinking, listening and remembering, and listening and talking as well as drawing, negotiating, and performing physical activities.

The Art of a Jolt

Clearly, using jolts is fun, energizing, and highly effective in many training situations. But before using them, you need to carefully consider both your motivation for using them and your ability to handle difficult situations.

Chapter 5 provides some very specific recommendations, but in general we suggest the judicious use of these jolts. When you do use a jolt, we highly recommend setting aside plenty of time for debriefing. In addition, we suggest a nimble, flexible approach to facilitation that includes a rapid pace when conducting jolts and a willingness to abandon a chosen jolt if you anticipate a too severe reaction from participants or if a point has been made sufficiently before the end of a jolt.

Debriefing a Jolt

Without a debriefing discussion, jolts would certainly not be an effective training, learning, or engagement tool; in fact, jolts might even be considered potentially harmful without careful debriefing. Chapter 6 offers you detailed instructions on how

to debrief jolts, but in general there are three reasons to support our insistence on debriefing:

1. More learning results from *reflecting* on an experience than from the experience itself.
2. Debriefing reduces possible negative impact from a jolt by allowing “wind down” time and increasing opportunities for positive insights.
3. Debriefing maximizes impact and connection to your training objectives.

Some activities benefit more than others from extensive debriefing, and you will find more guidance in Chapter 6. However, you can be sure that jolts with potential strong positive or negative emotional reactions or activities that are too brief or abstract to be understood without a debriefing are clear-cut candidates for this follow-up session.

Next Steps

Now that you have an overview of what a jolt is and how to use it, perhaps *showing you* rather than *telling* you how to introduce and facilitate a jolt session might be the best next step. Chapter 2 is intended as your window into how an experienced facilitator might handle a typical jolt session. If reading through the provided scenario is not enough *showing* for you, then go to our website (www.thiagi.com) and click on the jolt icon on our home page. You will find links to a few jolt session that clearly demonstrate the ropes of successful jolt facilitation. In addition, the website offers you some additional jolt-related content for both novice and advanced facilitators.

Chapter 2

Story of a Jolt

In the previous chapter you learned the basics of jolts along with how and when to use these powerful and sometimes provocative activities. Now, as promised, we offer a detailed narrative to convey what it is like to conduct a jolt in a training session. The narrative is written from the participant's point of view so that you fully understand the need for careful execution, facilitation, and debriefing of the jolt. As noted in Chapter 1, if you would like to watch an actual jolt in action, go to www.thiagi.com, click on the Jolts icon, and follow the links provided.

Personal Productivity Workshop

You are on your way to attend a workshop in the company's new training facility. Your HR department has touted the program you are about to attend on improving productivity and managing multiple projects as innovative, practical, and perhaps even inspiring. Although you are looking forward to discovering any new information, tips, or techniques the workshop may reveal, the idea of abandoning all that work on your desk, even if it is only to attend a half-day workshop, has increased your anxiety.

For weeks, you have battled an energy-draining inertia of unknown origin. Lately, you've attacked the issue head on. You've left your home every morning determined to get more done, to be more efficient, to get off the dime; but every day you come home utterly disappointed about your ability to affect any significant change. You are worried that your supervisor will stop by for a friendly chat or perhaps to check on the status of other assignments. You play out the familiar scenario in your mind, the one in which your supervisor makes a humorous remark about the disorganized stacks of files on your desk and the annoyingly supportive follow-up email asking if you would like to attend an organization training class very similar to the one you are on your way to attend.

After taking your customary seat near the back of the room, the facilitator, Marie, walks in at 8:20 a.m. (right on time) and starts the workshop. Without any preliminary comments or introductions about the workshop, she begins the program.

"Good morning everyone," Marie says brightly over all the chatter and chuckles produced by the group of colleagues and friends. When Marie feels she has everyone's attention she begins.

"Okay, here's what I want you to do to start today's training. I want everyone to put their hands together and clap just once." Most participants (including you) are caught by

surprise and a bit confused. But you and the other attendees attempt to carry out Marie's instructions. The resulting group clap was more a smattering of individual claps along with a generous portion of chuckles and guffaws and class clown comments.

Marie smiles at the group and comments about the group's performance. "That was way too ragged," she says. "So why don't we try it again?"

"This time," Marie continues, "I'd like everyone to clap just once in total synchrony so that our collective clap will sound like a single, loud clap. Do you think that's possible?"

You are beginning to wonder what this exercise has to do with personal productivity, but decide to play along for now.

"I know that this may be difficult for some of you," Marie says, "so I am going to provide you with a non-electronic performance support system you will all recognize." Marie waits two beats and then delivers the punch line. "I am going to count to three." Despite yourself, you chuckle and feel yourself relax a bit. Although Marie has given the complete instructions, she asks again if everyone understands and repeats them once more, this time even more slowly and deliberately:

"OK," she says, "Here are the instructions—I am going to count to three [she counts, holding up a finger for each count] and I want everyone to clap together when I say [she emphasizes the word] *clap!*"

You nod your head in agreement along with the rest of the group and raise your hands in front of you, poised to clap your hands together when prompted by Marie.

One, Two, Three

Marie surveys the room to make sure everyone is paying attention. She raises her hands in front of her and holds them a few inches apart. Then she breathes slightly before saying the words, "One, two, three." When she says "three," Marie claps her hands decisively.

All the participants in the room follow her lead and clap their hands in unison. After a short pause, Marie says the word, "clap" and you almost immediately get the joke. You feel a little embarrassed and a bit annoyed. You feel the facilitator trapped you into making a mistake and now the anxiety caused by your overzealous supervisor and backlog of the paperwork is back. You wonder whether you could slip out of the class now and maybe make some progress on those reports before the dreaded email arrives. At least you'd be able to defend yourself.

Sorry About That

While the participants laugh and look around the room to make sure that everyone made the same mistake and to ensure they have not been singled out as the "class dope," Marie apologizes for deception and for trapping everyone to make a mistake. Then the affable facilitator explains to the group why the activity has a serious point to make.

"You see," Marie says, "this exercise is a dramatic example of the gap between *understanding* and *application*. Everyone heard and thought they understood that they were supposed to wait until I said the word 'Clap' before actually clapping their hands together. Yet no one applied this knowledge."

"So what's the point?" Marie continued, "The point is this: It is not sufficient for you to merely understand the principles we will explore in the workshop. Rather, it is the *application* that will determine how successfully we have spent our time here together."

You feel a little better now that you understand the point of the exercise, but from now on you determine to listen carefully, especially if today's workshop includes any more traps like this one.

So This Is a Jolt

The example provided above is a simple (and pretty mild) jolt and it is included in the book as Jolt 40, Synchronized Clapping. Despite its simplicity, this jolt includes all the classic elements of this type of experiential activity:

- **Time-Limited.** Jolts last for a very short period of time. Marie's jolt lasted for a minute and half. Some jolts may last for less than a minute. By our definition, no jolt can last more than five minutes.
- **Insight- Rather Than Skills-Focused.** Jolts provide participants with insights rather than skills. They startle the participants into re-examining their assumptions and revising their habitual practices.
- **Possibility of Emotional Impact.** Jolts produce emotional effects. Some jolts produce feelings of discomfort or elation; all jolts result in "aha" moments and surprise.
- **Participant Interaction and Introspection.** Some jolts require interaction among participants, and all jolts require *introspection* on the part of individual participants.
- **Debriefing.** The discussion after the activity maximizes the learning outcomes from the jolt. This process involves explanations from the facilitator and discussions among the participants.

Participant Emotional Baggage

In addition to the standard elements noted above, jolts often increase the possibility that the emotional baggage that every participant brings to training events (including anxieties, insecurities, and hot button issues) will not stay safely packed away until the end of the event. In the scenario presented above, the participant with the passive-aggressive boss was primed to have a confrontation. Marie's explanation kept the situation in check. But what if the purpose of the jolt had been to explore what keeps people from taking positive action? Only expert facilitation and debriefing would prevent this participant from publicly venting his anger and frustration. Would you know how to handle such an outburst?

As you will see in Chapter 6, we provide very specific techniques that will help you control and channel the emotional reactions to group activities. Each of the jolts outlined in Part 2 provides specific debriefing techniques.

Now that you understand what a jolt is and how it works, the next three chapters describe the types of jolts, the key ways to conduct jolts, and important tips to successfully facilitate them.

Chapter 3

Types of Jolts

As noted earlier, we classify jolts broadly into two types, *entrapment* jolts and *enlightenment* jolts. This classification—how the jolt is positioned or perceived by the participants—is useful for picking a jolt for a specific training situation or purpose. Further classification of jolts is possible by grouping the activities by shared elements and themes and by the number of participants, media type, or props used, or by the grouping or repetition of jolts. This chapter explores these application and usage variations and offers ways you might customize jolts for your own training needs or situations. Specifically, this chapter covers the following classification categories:

- Positioning
- Number of Participants
- Media and Props
- Activity Type
- Facilitator Methodology

Positioning

How jolts are positioned is perhaps the most useful classification. As we've pointed out, *entrapment* jolts are designed to reveal more effective alternative behaviors to participants after they've been encouraged (or maybe even tricked) into following comfortable, familiar, and practiced behavior patterns. As the name implies, the facilitator takes on a provocative stance when conducting entrapment jolts.

Enlightenment jolts are designed to help participants discover “aha” moments that connect to core principles and the work of reinforcing effective strategies. Your job as an enlightenment jolt facilitator is to be a coach for the participants.

Entrapment Jolts

Part 2 of this book contains several entrapment exercises, including the two examples used below. Many of the activities are designed to lead the participant away from the correct answer or approach and then point out the mistake. For example, in Jolt 26, New Word, participants achieve success in the first round by using a specific strategy. The context of the second round appears to be very similar to that of the first one. However, the strategy from the first round does not work in the second round. In order to succeed

in the second round, participants must use an entirely different strategy. Another entrapment jolt, Jolt 5, Decode, strongly implies competition among teams. However, the winning strategy requires the opposite: collaboration among different teams.

While these “bait and switch” activities are often fun and produce nothing more than good natured laughter, it is easy to see how some participants may not appreciate being “trapped.”

Enlightenment Jolts

You will find several enlightenment jolts in Part 2, and all these jolts enable the participants to discover useful strategies and principles. For example, Jolt 28, Next Action, is a thought experiment designed to guide an individual participant through a systematic process of identifying needs, specifying goals, and deciding on a small next step. The participant must complete the task in a limited time frame—a matter of minutes—and can complete the assignment without any challenge or confrontation.

Another enlightenment jolt, Jolt 14, Excited, relies on a larger group of participants to playfully provide stage directions to a smaller group charged with holding up letters that spell a word. Participants discover their moment of *enlightenment* during debriefing when the facilitator helps them identify key factors that contribute to high levels of motivation.

Number of Participants

The second major way to classify jolts is by the number of participants involved. In theory, most of the jolts described in this book are appropriate for use with groups of any size. Some exercises require at least two participants (Jolt 27, Newton), other team-driven jolts (Jolt 1, Alliances; Jolt 23, Me and My Team) require enough participants to form one or two teams. Some jolts such as Jolt 40, Synchronized Clapping, work best in larger groups. However, most jolts presented in this book can be conducted with just a single participant.

Media and Props

Some jolts in this book require the use of PowerPoint slides, while others require that you have access to audio or video recording devices. While most jolts in this book do not require props, some jolts do require at least some facsimile of the required prop. For example, Jolt 33, Psychic Card, uses PowerPoint slides to present playing cards.

If you use Jolt 29, Palm to Palm, then the use of audio recording equipment is recommended. Although not suggested directly in this book, it is possible to incorporate video recording into a jolts activity. If you would like to see how this is done, visit the thiagi.com website and click the jolts tab.

Clearly, trainers and professional facilitators are familiar with the use of props and appreciate their learning impact. We have deliberately chosen to take a simple approach and not require excessive use of props. However, some jolts do require their use. For example, Jolt 49, Workers and Watchers, requires blindfolds and pieces of ropes. Jolt 1, Alliances, requires the use of playing cards while facilitating the jolts. Jolt 9, Double Your Money, and Jolt 6, Dollar Action, require real cash. You will need a puzzle for Jolt 22, Long Words, and Jolt 42, Team Power. Simple pen and paper is needed to successfully run Jolt 7, Don't Lift the Pen, and Jolt 10, Draw a Hand.