

## TEAM EXERCISE

# Standard Pig Exercise

A paper-and-pen activity that makes the case for standard work and clear operational definitions.

## Everyone Knows How to Draw a Pig

The Standard Work Exercise, widely known as the Standard Pig Exercise, is a deceptively simple activity that makes the case for clear operational definitions in minutes. Participants are given vague instructions to draw a pig, then compare their wildly different results with each other. The exercise repeats with precise, standardized instructions, and this time the pigs look nearly identical. The contrast is immediate and memorable: it illustrates why standard work matters, why "everyone knows how to do it" is not a process control strategy, and how variation creeps into any task without clear, shared documentation — whether that documentation is a work instruction or a written program description everyone agrees on at the outset. No materials budget required, just paper and pens.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Following the exercise, participants will be able to discuss the benefits of agreeing on written work instructions — or a written program description or logic model — before the work begins.

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Instruction Sheets 1, 2 and 3
- Three exercise grids per participant
- Markers or pens for everyone
- Craft supplies for decoration (optional)

#### TIME TO COMPLETE

**20–30 Minutes**

#### ROUNDS

**Three**

#### PARTICIPANTS

**Any Group Size**

#### CONCEPTS COVERED

Standard Work  
Operational Definitions  
Process Variation  
Work Instructions  
Communication Gaps  
Consistency in Process Execution

# Facilitating the Exercise

Three rounds, each followed by a comparison. Hold the discussion after every round — the shift between rounds is where the learning happens.

- 1 Hand out the first grid**  
Provide each participant with one exercise grid and at least one marker or pen.
- 2 Introduce standard work**  
Introduce the concept briefly and explain that the exercise will develop it more fully.
- 3 Round one — two minutes**  
Pass out Instruction Sheet 1, or copy the instructions onto a slide. Tell participants they have two minutes to complete the first set of instructions on the grid.
- 4 Compare the first round**  
Ask participants to hold up their pigs so everyone can see. Facilitate a discussion on what the experience was like and what they notice about the differences. Ask them to keep this sheet.
- 5 Round two — three minutes**  
Pass each participant a second grid and Instruction Sheet 2. Tell them they have three minutes to complete the instructions.
- 6 Compare the second round**  
Hold up the pigs again. Facilitate a discussion on what drawing a pig was like this time compared to the first, and what they notice about the results.
- 7 Round three — two minutes**  
Pass each participant a third grid and Instruction Sheet 3. They have two minutes, and may use both Instruction Sheets 2 and 3.
- 8 Compare the third round**  
Hold up the pigs one last time and compare against both earlier rounds. This is where the pigs look nearly identical.
- 9 Connect it to their own work**  
Facilitate participants in a final discussion about how this applies to their own work and how this might relate to having a written program description or logic model. Ask participants if they have had a related experience either in program implementation or program evaluation where there was a lack of agreement on the program among all stakeholders and what impact this had.
- 10 Point to the next step**  
Refer participants to your organization's process for documenting work — or, in an evaluation setting, to the first step of your program evaluation model.

# Debrief

Run the comparison after every round rather than saving it all for the end. The point lands in the difference between rounds, not in the last drawing.

## What was it like to draw the pig the first time?

Everyone followed the instructions they were given, and no two results match. Nobody made a mistake — the instructions allowed every one of those outcomes.

## What changed once the instructions were standardized?

The pigs converge, and the room usually reports that the work felt slower but easier to check. Ask what specifically removed the variation: named objects, stated positions, a defined sequence.

## Where does this show up in your own work?

Ask for a task everyone believes is already understood. "Everyone knows how to do it" is not a process control strategy — it is an untested assumption about how much variation the process is carrying.

## SOURCE & FURTHER READING

The standard pig exercise has long been used to teach standard work in continuous improvement. See the Minnesota Office of Continuous Improvement CI Toolbox, Minnesota Department of Administration.

Adapted for evaluation capacity building by Allison Meserve, Public Health Ontario: *Standard pig exercise for evaluation capacity building*. Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion, Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario; 2017.

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# Instruction Sheet 1

Use the exercise grid you have been given. You have two minutes.

- 1 Draw the side profile of a pig, centered on the page.
- 2 Make sure the pig's head is facing left.
- 3 The pig should be drawn large enough so that a piece of it is in every box **except the top right**.
- 4 You have two minutes to draw your pig.



## Instruction Sheet 2

Work through the tasks in order on a fresh exercise grid. You have three minutes.

| TASK | DESCRIPTION                                                                                                     | SUB-TASK | INSTRUCTIONS                                                       |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1    | Draw a letter M at the top left intersection of the gridlines.                                                  | 1.1      | The bottom center of the M touches the intersection.               |
| 2    | Draw the letter W at the intersection of the gridlines on the bottom left of the page.                          | 2.1      | The top center of the W touches the intersection of the gridlines. |
| 3    | Draw the letter W at the intersection of the gridlines on the bottom right of the page.                         | 3.1      | The top center of the W touches the intersection.                  |
| 4    | Draw an arc from the letter M you drew in the top left, over to the intersection of gridlines at the top right. |          |                                                                    |
| 5    | Draw another arc from the top right intersection to the W that you drew at the bottom right of the page.        |          |                                                                    |
| 6    | Draw an arc between the two bottom W's, with the arc in the shape of an upside down rainbow.                    |          |                                                                    |
| 7    | Draw the letter O in the center of the middle box on the left of the page.                                      |          |                                                                    |
| 8    | Draw an arc from the letter M on the left of the page to the tangent of the circle.                             |          |                                                                    |
| 9    | Draw an arc from the letter W on the left side to the tangent of the circle.                                    |          |                                                                    |
| 10   | Draw an arc for the eye halfway between the M and the circle.                                                   |          |                                                                    |
| 11   | Draw an arc for the mouth halfway between the W and the circle.                                                 | 11.1     | Must be a happy pig.                                               |
| 12   | Draw the cursive letter "e" near the top of the arc on the right side of the page, in the middle box.           | 12.1     | The "e" should be touching the arc at one end.                     |
| 13   | Draw two dots in the middle of the circle for the pig's nose.                                                   |          |                                                                    |

Instruction Sheet 3



