

Does team-building really work?

What does it take to get the most out of your team development investments?

By Warwick John Fahy

Is your company expanding this year? Chances are it is. This exciting growth period brings with it a new challenge: team-building. Building effective teams should be high on all managers' lists for 2007. The question is, how can you get the highest levels of performance from your team while you are still adding hundreds of new hires each year?

What is team-building?

Winston Churchill once noted that if you put two economists in a room, you get two opinions. The same could be said when defining team-building. For some it is getting the guys together for Friday drinks, casual clothes day or an annual dinner. Others believe a family, sports or away day are team-building events. While treasure hunts and amazing races are often preferred as team-building activities, recently more companies have been using business simulations and personality assessments to enhance their teamwork.

While all these activities are useful in building good feeling within a company, they are more focused on the fun and social side of building relationships.

Team-building should be a systematic method to increase competency and productivity of corporate teams. Generally, there are two main philosophies on how to carry out team-building.



The simplest activities can impart valuable lessons about teamwork

Outward bound

Outward bound includes the high and low ropes courses and can even involve mountaineering expeditions and hardship survival courses. The thinking goes that by pushing people outside their comfort zones and forcing them to trust their team members for survival, deep bonds of trust are built.

This can work out well, as anyone who has been on a tough team physical challenge will attest. The badge of surviving to-

gether can bond the team into the future. This idea works well in the West, where comfortable managers often need a shot in the arm to get motivated. The dynamic and challenging business environment in China already places great stress and challenges on managers here.

Potential pitfalls with outward bound include the added risk factor. Not every manager and director is a picture of physical health. Facing a thousand-metre mountain climb into a headwind might not be their

idea of a fun time. Also, ill-equipped and untrained supervisors can increase the risk greatly; fatalities are reported every year. Companies are well advised to check their vendors and their own insurance coverage before sending teams on such expeditions.

Action learning

Action learning (also known as experiential, or facilitated, learning) takes a different, less physical, approach. The thinking here goes that people learn by discovery, especially when they are having fun in a relaxed environment. Teams gather in off-site locations, ideally near nature. Suzhou, Hangzhou, Guilin and Hainan are all common favourites.

Activities are designed so that participants can explore a particular issue, for example, cross-functional communication. A facilitator briefs the teams and gives them an objective, often deliberately not giving complete information. Teams are given a fixed time to reach their outcome. Along

the way, teams face challenges and, as they solve problems, learn new ways to cooperate and communicate with each other.

A time to debrief the activities allows participants to share their joys and frustrations while learning more about the skill being developed. A potential pitfall with action learning is that the fun can sometimes lead to complaints from participants afterwards that they did not learn anything useful. A skilful facilitator will help them tie this learning discovery back to their workplace roles.

What is a highly effective team?

While many definitions exist on what a high-performing team is, the simple answer is the ability to get results. When you break it down a little further, some other key elements appear: having clear roles within the team; being able to cooperate; building a unique team spirit; allowing members personal development.

Conversely, ineffective teams tend to

have no clear goals, mistrust and poor communication. These lead to higher turnover and lower self-motivation among the team.

Let's take the case of a pharmaceutical company or technology company opening a research centre in China. From scratch, a new team has to be hired and is expected to produce results. Companies can support this through team-building.

No one likes to be told what he is doing wrong, but generally most people love to learn how they can improve themselves. Activities take place in a fun, relaxed environment. Just getting a team together outside of the office can be refreshing. When people are relaxed, they are more receptive to learning and exploring.

Secondly, team-building also approaches difficult issues in an abstract way, outside of the employees' workplace context. This enables the team members to separate themselves from the problem. If Roger feels that an activity has been designed to overcome his perceived lack of

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► communication skills, he will be extremely reluctant to participate and to change. Avoiding these types of inner obstacles and barriers is a key to successful experiential learning.

Finally, team-building activities accelerate learning through exaggerating the issues by imposing external constraints on the team. For example, a popular activity called Blind House involves a team who are first blindfolded and then instructed to build the outline of a house using a few lengths of rope. If communication is an problem in your office today, imagine how much more challenging it would be if everyone were blindfolded!

The debrief

After the activity, when the excitement is still in the air, a facilitator will help the team understand what they were doing well, where the obstacles came from and how well they overcome the constraints. It is amazing how the words people use in the debrief often reflect real business situations. “I couldn’t see the big picture.” “I told him to do it, but he didn’t listen to me.” “We didn’t know we could ask for help.”

The real “wow” moments come at this stage when the team realize the connection to their roles in the company and begin to discover ways to overcome this in the future.

Many team-building events fall short

Many team-building activities disappoint. A combination of short-term thinking and time limitations can constrict potential gains.

An example of short-term thinking happens when a whole company gets together – some-

times up to several hundred people – for an event. Although the company wants to develop its teams’ skills, no follow-up is built into the training schedule or team development program later in the year, and the potential knowledge-sharing is forgotten at the end of the day.

Sometimes it is a question of company culture or leadership. Some companies have a much more rigorous and measurable personal and team development program. Increasingly however, companies that do not have such programs suffer

the consequences. Higher turnover, lower productivity and difficulties in recruiting are added to the already competitive and fierce human resources challenges in China today.

The best ways to overcome these obstacles are clear communication and planning.

Firstly, decide whether the team-building is for fun or for developmental purposes. A fun event does not need a follow-up plan.

Decide how team development fits into your overall company plan and also team members’ personal development. Have a follow-up plan. Team members should be told that they will be “tested” on the skills developed and given advance notice.

Involve a line manager who has the incentive to see his team’s skills improve. Work with an experienced facilitator to design both activities relevant for the outcomes you require and different solutions for different stages of a team. Newly formed teams need different considerations from mature teams.

Finally, push for activities that leave tangible outcomes in the hands of team members. A problem-solving tool, a team vision or a commitment to train other team members are all useful ways to continue the learning beyond the team-building event.

Warwick John Fahy is a Shanghai-based human resources consultant, specialising in leadership and team development. He is currently Chairman for Toastmasters International in China and a Certified Professional Facilitator. He can be contacted at warwick@warwickjohnfahy.com