

BUILDING EFFECTIVE TEAMS

While some repetitive team-building activities may elicit eye rolls and scepticism from employees, experts say it's up to leaders to promote engagement and cohesion.

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In all probability, every employee and executive in the modern workplace will have participated in a team-building activity in their working life. Ranging from mundane trust falls and ropes courses to daredevil bungee jumping and skydiving, team-building exercises can be a catalyst for team bonding and cohesion—or a simple waste of time.

Founder of Insight in Business
Helen Kerrison says CEOs need to choose their team-building

exercises carefully. “Physical or intellectual activities need to enhance and develop the ‘chemistry’ between team members and executive leadership,” she says.

“It is important that the activities help individual team members use their strengths in an effective way and also work on developing the areas in which they are individually weak for the collective benefit of the team. Both team members and executives should take away an understanding and appreciation of the value that each of the team members—through >



their individual uniqueness—brings to the whole.”

Team-building activities should generate greater interdependence, increased communication, and an increased dedication and commitment to shared goals and objectives. Peter McLean, Managing Director of Lamplighter Performance Consulting, says it’s important that leaders maximise the effectiveness of these activities.

“Good team-building activities should demonstrate what I call ‘analogic congruity,’” he says. “That is, they should be analogous to the work teams actually do and build skills that increase on-the-job performance.

“I’ve never worked somewhere where the staff need to learn how to bungee jump, walk on hot coals, or jump off a 10-metre-high pole to increase their productivity. The activities should be both analogous to the work and have motivation that is tied up in their daily work.”

Peter has seen a number of innovative, productive team-building activities. “We’ve had leaders from a mining company build small assembly lines to assemble a novelty item and instruct others in working the line, spotting problems, and anticipating behaviours using certain verbal tools,” he says.

“We had senior executives from a disability-services provider assemble a wheelchair from one of their own departments and work under the direction of one of their colleagues. We had senior leaders planning, rehearsing, and evaluating presentations together to increase their overall communication and collaboration on improvement projects. The more congruent the activity was to real life, the greater the opportunity for skills transference.”

When deciding which activities to engage in, Peter urges leaders to consider how the activity will

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- Helen Kerrison

relate to their employees’ work and what it will yield. “Executives should always look to the kinds of results they want before engaging in any team-building activities,” he says. “That way, it’s easy to see what you should take away from team building.

“A common mistake executives make is to choose their activity, time frame, and format and then attempt to retrofit relevant outcomes over it. Firms have contacted me to say that they need a one-day team-building or re-energising conference. I ask them why they think one or two days is going to do the job, and their immediate response is because that’s the time and format they have chosen. But it doesn’t work.

“A better approach is to determine your desired results and outcomes first, and, with that in mind, design backwards. It’s what you would do if you were building a city tower, so why don’t you do it with building a great team?”

Peter has seen quite a few groups grow through team-building activities. “One senior executive team I worked with in the health-services industry had to overcome years of harassment, intimidation, and suppression at the C-suite level and then determine and commit to new plans and standards for behaviour, communication, and cooperation,” he notes.

“In general, if you have a true team, you should be leaving with greater interdependence, resolution of some performance inhibitors, increased communication and transparency, movement towards shared goals, and a plan for how you are going to translate these outcomes once you get back to the office.”

Conversely, Peter states, many senior executives he speaks to can recount tales of inane and pointless exercises that only exacerbated bad situations. “They

told tales of being asked to fall back into the arms of despised enemies, of being instructed to share intimate and embarrassing personal information with distrusted colleagues, and being told off by ‘facilitators’ for not being open-minded and just following directions,” he recalls.

“If handled unwisely, team-building activities can create more problems than they resolve. They end up being included in everyone’s litany: ‘Here we go again, another team-building event.’”

Beyond the pointless exercises, Helen says, many seemingly successful team-building activities can result in a temporary fix. “Traditional team-building activities are centred around some sort of community activity which fosters a superficial ‘in the moment’ cooperation and does not promote or engender sustainable collaboration and co-creation—which are the foundations of a successful team,” she explains.

“Conscious team building focuses on accessing deeper levels of awareness within and between employees, creating sustainably successful teams. The biggest mistake is that executives don’t think consciously about the outcomes they want from team-building activities.

“Team building tends to be used as a ‘day out of the office’ motivational event or perk for employees rather than a valuable and strategic outcomes-based developmental tool that helps build the positive, sustainable impact of the team on the business.”

A conscious and focused approach to team building is essential. Many executives view team building as an isolated, fun activity rather than an ingrained part of everyday work.

“Team building should be what you are doing every day,” Peter

says. “You have to link team-development opportunities as part of a daily, weekly, and monthly plan to build up the team’s capability, performance, and productivity.

“If I jump off a cliff or walk over coals, I may feel more accomplished and successful in the moment, but it’s not going to change a lifetime habit of obstructing others’ suggestions, parsimonious budgeting, lack of strategic development of my workforce, or workplace culture and regulations that constrain my behaviour.”

According to Peter, team building should be part of an overall improvement process in the C-suite and further down the hierarchy. “Leaders should prepare their team through a number of avenues,” he says. “Long before the event, they should discuss what specific kinds of improvements you all wish to make in the workplace as a consequence of these activities.

“They should have each team member devise personal improvement points they wish to take away from the team building, and set clear expectations about outcomes, processes, and standards

of behaviour and attitude immediately before the event.”

During the team-building activity, executives and leaders should participate in, not dominate, the event. “This is not about ego or proving who is the loudest or most obnoxious; it is about working together to achieve better results,” Peter says. “At the same time, you should encourage team members to work through barriers in their thinking and be rationally open-minded.

“After the event, reinforce concepts and implement changes and systems that will solidify the development and growth achieved during the activities. Additionally, talk one on one with team members about the effectiveness of the team building as well as outstanding or new issues, and provide a roadmap for continual improvement.”

In this process—before, during, and after the activity—Helen says one of the biggest issues and roadblocks is the way executives position themselves. “Executives’ sole responsibility is to provide the environment for all involved to develop and build on the strengths, gifts, and talents of each individual for the collective

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benefit of the team and business,” she says.

Peter stresses that effective team-building activities are an essential investment. “I often shake my head at the team-building attempts undertaken by companies and providers,” he notes. “Teams can achieve incredible things together: win championships, build bridges, and land a mechanical rover at a predetermined spot on Mars.

“Yet, executives frequently delegate this most important aspect of their performance while they endlessly pore over budget numbers regarding the number of widgets on the floor or plants spread throughout the office.

“It’s not something that you can simply outsource to HR, nor is it something you should foolishly undertake on your own. You need to take the reins and obtain trusted advice, whether external or internal, that will help you race successfully down the track.”

Leaders and their teams will navigate this path to success by encouraging a culture of consistent team cohesion and communication, and introducing team-building activities that reinforce the team’s shared goals and interdependence. ●

