TEAM BUILDING STRATEGIES  

BY ANNA KEAVNEY

It is no surprise to learn that investment in team building frequently reflects the bottom line, rising and falling with company profitability. The occurrence, quality and outcomes of team building events may be impacted by the busyness of the team or the lack of time taken to properly plan an event that is relevant and appropriate for the given team and its members.

Team building events may be deprioritised, degraded or cancelled altogether when teams are overloaded and stressed out. At the very time when the importance of effective team work and driving productivity is most essential. One does not need to be a human resources expert to recognise that this approach will decrease your employee job satisfaction and engagement and may lead to more errors, employee burnout and turnover. In fact this approach is more consistent with crisis or issue management than effective people management.

Effective Team Building Strategies

The power is in the planning

Take the time to define the objectives of the team building event, such as resolving conflict, boosting morale, managing organisational change, enhancing productivity, developing skills or enhancing team communication. If the objectives are simply to provide a social forum for the team and reward them with a brief break from work then planning the menu for a lunch should be sufficient. However if you want more from your team event then focused planning is essential to select a relevant activity to drive results.

A team facilitation session may be beneficial to identify a shared view of what are the most important objectives whilst fostering a greater understanding of the unique perspectives, characteristics and roles of individual team members. Open dialogue can stimulate a team, encourage creative thinking, brainstorming and collaboration. Moreover teams members often understand their needs better than managers.

Education and skill development

Most of us have attended team building events, but how many of these would we recall as pivotal to our skills development or team productivity? When planning your team event you should consider the unique nature and needs of the team and its members asking such questions as: what knowledge and skills would the group most benefit from in the context of their work and work environment?

Communication and problem solving

Communication and problem solving are excellent examples of generic team building activities, which are genuinely designed to enhance teamwork, emotional intelligence and task-associated skills. However I would argue that this approach could be taken even further by embedding education in your team building event. Frequently there is a limited budget for learning and development for any given team but a sum is allocated annually towards team building. If as a manager you have only a few dedicated opportunities in each calendar year to beef up your teams, then it is essential you try to maximise the benefits from these events.

Try and identify the specific learning needs and/or skill deficiencies in your team so that you can simultaneously develop the team and up-skill staff through a single investment in a customised activity. Skills like project management, business process mapping, customer service and the use of new communication technologies as part of standard business practice are relevant across a broad range of disciplines, functions and teams. Or what about tasking the team with the development of an infographic or video on a relevant industry or team topic as a contemporary and different way to learn a new technical skill (with guidance and instruction) whilst developing the team at the same time? Alternatively you could plan a team building event within the business’ Corporate Social Responsibility program. The possibilities are limited only by your creativity. Just figure out what the best learning value add is for your team and go from there.

By incorporating education and skill development into team building you are also avoiding the common pitfall of selecting a team building activity which whilst fun has no relationship to the workplace and therefore has a limited ability to drive productivity e.g. a game of baseball.

If you are an Learning and Development manager then consider how you could assist business managers to plan relevant team building events that incorporate education. You could also facilitate a planning session for business managers to brainstorm team building ideas whilst developing the management team concurrently. Genius!

In addition, research indicates that 76% of employees seek opportunities for career growth and that this is one of the top three non-financial motivators in the workplace. Thus delivering training within your team building event is likely to drive employee engagement as well as individual learning and team building.

Self reflection brings growth

Regardless of the team building activity selected for your team event, the incorporation of facilitated group self reflection is integral to
enhancing emotional intelligence, intra-team relationships, learnings, skills development, productivity, team work and reducing team conflict. Or in layman’s terms, it should lead to some interesting conversations that hopefully breaks down barriers and increases your understanding of others and yourself.

Such reflection can simply be asking the team at appropriate intervals throughout the activity to share their feedback on how the team performed at the given task including identifying any strengths and weaknesses, any issues encountered or lessons learnt.

For such facilitations to be meaningful it is important that a non-judgmental atmosphere is created so that resources feel comfortable to provide input and confident this won’t impact their career progression. Conducting such events offsite or through independent facilitators can assist in distancing staff from team or corporate conflict and hierarchical conceptions.

Often this sharing and analysis can be the key to team building and learning.

**Unite teams**

Beware the double edged sword of any team event, where you run the risk of alienating individual team members by the very activity you have selected to build the team up.

For instance, I recall my dismay when I was invited to an offsite manager team building weekend at the Hunter Valley when unbeknownst to the business I was in the first trimester of my pregnancy and experiencing morning sickness. I didn’t know how I would be able to put my best foot forward nor keep my secret at a location famous for its wine and whilst working in such close proximity with others. There are many other personal, cultural, religious and health reasons why an individual would choose not to drink alcohol or may not feel comfortable in a particular environment.

Sporting events may also serve to benefit the young, fit, competitive and/or dominant types, whilst isolating others. Many employees have physical ailments or illnesses, which they choose to keep separate from the work place, and should have the right to do so.

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**TYPES OF TEAM BUILDING ACTIVITIES**

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<th>Popular Types of Team Building Activities</th>
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<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
<td>• Designed to reward staff with a break and enhance team relationships by facilitating a non-work based social event</td>
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<td>• Examples include team lunches, after work drinks and key milestone celebrations</td>
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<td><strong>Sporting</strong></td>
<td>• Designed to enhance team work and relationships by facilitating a non-work based sporting event</td>
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<td>• Example include touch football, dragonboat racing, ten-pin bowling and golf days</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Adventure</strong></td>
<td>• Designed to enhance team relationships by taking staff out of their comfort zones and facilitating a non-work based adventure event</td>
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<td>• Examples include abseiling, obstacle courses and the ever popular Harbour Bridge Climb for Sydneyiders</td>
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<td><strong>Planning</strong></td>
<td>• Designed to develop a shared understanding, vision and team work plan</td>
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<td>• Examples include facilitated planning workshops and brain storming sessions</td>
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<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>• Designed to enhance team work, relationships, creativity, communication skills and emotional intelligence</td>
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<td>• Examples include team presentations and improvisation activities</td>
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<td><strong>Problem Solving</strong></td>
<td>• Designed to develop team work, analytical skills, creativity and emotional intelligence</td>
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<td>• Examples include group micro-construction tasks, mind bending puzzles, brain teasers, team to create and solve their own problem</td>
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<td><strong>Trust, Rapport and Emotional Intelligence</strong></td>
<td>• Designed to enhance team work and productivity by driving team cohesion, understanding of others, relationships and self awareness</td>
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<td>• Examples include icebreakers, trust and rapport builders, personality questionnaires and facilitated group reflection</td>
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A quick glance at some of the more popular team building activities reveals that many of these are simply team based outings with no real team building component to drive team cohesion, productivity, corporate culture and develop individual skills. Is it any wonder that the team and business benefits derived by such fun and interactive activities as team lunches and bowling events are frequently minimal and short-lived? There is value to team building events; however much more can be achieved with a little creativity and commitment. And the value of the ‘fun factor’ should never be discounted!
Similarly communication activities may excite and develop some employees whilst sending others into spirals of anxiety and alienation.

Whilst recognising there should be a healthy limit to political correctness, managers will be only too aware that offending or alienating a team member can be very difficult to resolve and cause personal distress, team friction and be counterproductive. For these reasons and more, take a moment to consider each individual team member when planning your team building event.

**Gamification**

The latest and most exciting trend in team building is ‘gamification’, which uses game mechanics and simulation to create a fun and educational experience to drive engagement, reflection, understanding and team cohesion. In the training context, it provides a bridge between theory based learning and work based application and provides an opportunity for kinesthetic learning (“learning by doing”). Popular uses of gamification in the corporate setting include Treasure Hunts, role plays during recruitment, educational video games and customised applications. Similarly, brands and associations are increasingly incorporating game features in their platforms and social media sites to drive customer engagement.

According to ‘Top Gamification Stats and Facts for 2015 You Need to Know’, adult participants in gamified eLearning “scored 14% higher in skill-based-knowledge assessments, 11% higher in terms of factual-knowledge and demonstrated a 9% increase in retention rate” iii. Whilst in 2015, AITD added a new category for Gamification/Simulation for Learning in their annual Excellence Awards.

So get creative and plan a simulation for your next team building that is exciting, entertaining and teaches relevant skills for the work place. Be inspired by popular culture and such shows as The Apprentice and Survivor. Or start with the knowledge or skills you want to develop and then brainstorm relevant simulation ideas. Talk to your Learning and Development Manager for guidance and inspiration, or consider outsourcing to an established training and team building provider to save you time and ensure the success of your event.

Take inspiration from these strategies for effective team building to transform your next team building event from mediocre to magic. A bit of creativity and planning will inspire and develop your staff, make your team more cohesive and productive, and drive business performance. There is a wealth of free information and ideas on team building activities on the web to get you started and several local providers that can assist. Let’s take team building to the 21st century and inject it with strategy, education and fun.

**References**


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