

■ Meaningful Team-Building Activities

by Tom Terez

Q. Our office is going on a retreat, and we're thinking of doing some kind of team-building activity. What are your thoughts on this? Any suggestions?

A. As the veteran of many such exercises—including the Human Knot, during which I suffered a hyper-extended vastus lateralis—I am only too happy to address this issue. If you've ever flipped through one of the many trainer activity books, with titles like *One Billion Games Trainers Play and Amazingly Get Paid For*, you're well aware that there are all sorts of ways to spend an hour and loosely call it work.

You're also aware that our nation's productivity rate would soar if we'd just stop trying to figure out 150 ways to use a Popsicle stick.

Many activities are designed to prompt greater openness among team members. In one classic exercise, each participant jots down three things about himself or herself—two that are true, one that is false. A facilitator or group member then reads each person's list of three, and the others try to pick out the falsehood. This is a great way to get to know your colleagues, but in some cases, you'll learn more than you've ever wanted—or less.

For example, Bob writes: 1) I was once arrested for petty theft. 2) While in college, I chugged a whole bottle of tequila. 3) I love to

spend my free time watching Big-Time Wrestling. This information is almost certain to—and I'll be diplomatic here, in case Bob reads this—affect your working relationship with Bob.

Another example: You're eager to learn more about Fran, who seems to be so, well, dull. She writes: 1) I collect spoons. 2) I have spoons from all 50 states. 3) I have a thimble collection. After hearing this, will you be more or less likely

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to go to Fran for wild, crazy, so-far-out-of-the-box-it's-not-even-funny ideas?

There are also activities that show how teams are far more effective than individuals when grappling with complex problems. Perhaps you've encountered the famous "Airplane Crash in the Desert" scenario, in which you and your colleagues have to make key decisions to stay alive. There's also a jungle survival scenario, a mountain scenario, and several others.

These are lots of fun, mainly because you're so damn happy you're in a comfortable meeting room—and not nursing two broken legs while surveying the charred wreckage of a commercial airliner. Unfortunately, extensive studies—including my personal experience with at least

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two of these activities—show that there is a 96% chance your group will include an “expert” in whatever topic the situation addresses. This person invariably disrupts the whole exercise.

Let’s say your team is working on the jungle scenario. After everyone reads the background info, Chris begins: “Heck, this is easy. I just went on vacation to Puerto Rico and saw a rain forest, so I know all about this stuff.”

You: Wow, you got lost in the jungle?

Chris: No, we were on a bus tour.

You: Oh.

Chris: But the solution is so obvious to anyone who has been to a rain forest like I have. The first thing you need to do is...

A third category of activities aims to stir creativity while showing that group power can produce an astounding number of ideas. The facilitator holds up a nondescript object—say, a styrofoam cup—and asks the group to brainstorm pages and pages of ideas on how that object could be used. This exercise really gets the creative juices flowing, with people suggesting such uses as “drink with it” and “use it to pour acid into the facilitator’s eyes.”

Last but not least, there are activities that try to foster empathy among colleagues. One favorite is the so-called headband exercise, in which each person is physically labeled with a descriptor or directive—it’s wrapped around their forehead so everyone but them can see. John may be labeled “creative,” Mary may be a “great listener,” Maury may be a “conformist.” Directives can include things like “ignore me,” “listen

closely to me,” and so on. The group then proceeds to have a conversation, and these descriptors—which define how each person is perceived and treated by group members—trigger all sorts of discoveries, such as the realization that a staple is digging into your forehead.

A big downside to this activity is that some facilitators go a bit overboard when coming up with the labels. True story: One person—we’ll call him Bill—once spent 30 minutes wearing the words “laugh at me.” In keeping with the exercise, Bill didn’t know the nature of his label. What he *did* know, by the end of the half hour, is that he wanted to dismember each and every one of his so-called teammates. So caution is the keyword when coming up with labels.

Okay, okay, perhaps I’m being a bit harsh. And here’s a confession to soothe the feelings of all you trainers and facilitators: I myself have used three of the above-listed activities in my efforts to strengthen groups. Actually, I used one of them...or maybe it was someone else. My point is, these things can work—as long as you follow some critically important tips:

- Get clear on what the group wants and needs to gain from its team-building efforts—and only then start looking for the right activity. Don’t assume anything; meet with team members and get clear on their objectives. If they are expecting too much from a single activity, scope them down to something that’s realistic.

- Whatever the activity, always follow it with an in-depth debriefing session in which people crystallize their discoveries and link them with the real work situations. (And no, debriefing doesn’t suggest any removal of trousers.) This is what makes the activity useful and relevant.

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- If you think an activity may not be appropriate—if you feel that the odds against you are just too great—don't do it. Go back to the drawing board and come up with something else.
- Avoid those exercises that people have done so many times—like the Popsicle stick brainstorming ordeal. Put on your thinking cap and come up with something original. If your thinking cap seems worn out, get ideas from a friend who's especially creative, particularly if they sometimes facilitate these kinds of activities.
- Try to make the activities real. If you want the team-building to have a customer focus, organize a session in which team members go out to meet and talk with customers. If the intent is

simply to tighten the team's bonds, look for a one-day community service project, such as a clean-up at a nearby park or repair work for a local homeless shelter. Followed by a thorough debriefing session, authentic activities like these can produce a surge of pride and team spirit.

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