

Team Building in a Poor Economy – 6 Strategies for In-house Success

In an ideal world, when a manager identifies issues that are preventing his/her team from running as efficiently as possible, s/he would simply hire an outside consultant. This is preferable to an in-house, manager-led program for a number of different reasons. First, when a team-building workshop is run in-house, it can be difficult for the team to see the leader in a role other than the manager. Likewise, it is difficult for the manager to view the participants in new ways. Secondly, it may be challenging for the manager to open his/her mind to the idea that what s/he thinks is the problem may only be a symptom of a larger problem, and that team members may have a wholly different view of the issue. Finally, pre-existing office politics do not disappear simply because the day's activities differ from the norm.

Unfortunately, in today's economic climate idealism often clashes with reality, and the reality is that team-building may be a line item that is quickly eliminated as organizations and departments struggle to work with shrinking budgets. So managers are left in a quandary, as they have identified that their teams need to work better together, yet they lack the monetary resources to bring an outside consultant in to assist with their objective. Furthermore, managers are often asked to do more work with fewer resources.

If a manager finds him/herself in this position, there are a number of different strategies that can be used to ensure that a team building session is successfully run in-house, even without outside expertise. To follow are six strategies that can help drive a successful team-building event.

Gradually Slow Down: Ever had to make a sudden stop in your car? It is generally not a pleasant experience. The same concept applies to work. If team members are suddenly jolted out of their routine to take part in a team-building day, their minds will often wander to the tasks on their to-do lists. To avoid this, provide team members plenty of advance notice that they'll be slowing down for a day, and let them know how important it is that they bring their full attention with them (i.e., no cell phones, lap tops, etc).

Make the Objectives Explicit: Most individuals want to know why they are taking part in a meeting. With team-building this is often ignored, leaving team members to wonder whether they are taking part in a punitive meeting. The leader can easily frame this in a positive manner. One example of this is: "We have set some incredibly aggressive goals for our team this quarter, and we will all need to work together more efficiently in order to achieve them. It makes sense to regroup for a day to ensure that we're all on the same page moving forward. I've gone ahead and scheduled an offsite (or conference room) for a workshop that will last the entire day."

Open Your Mind: If a manager feels the need to have a team-building workshop, then it is likely that s/he has identified "blockages" that are preventing a team from working to its potential. This brings to mind the tale of the five blind men and the elephant: each described the portion of the elephant with which they came in contact with certainty, although each description significantly differed from the rest. It is possible that the

manager is only seeing a portion of the issue. If you approach the rest of your team with an open mind, and explicitly state that you do not have all the answers, you are more likely to solicit their honest opinions, and a more complete picture can be created as to what the issues – and solutions - are.

Pop the Bubble: Team members understandably adopt a narrow focus on their individual tasks. Although this bubble can help to shield team members from external interruptions, it can also blind a team member from recognizing the importance of their task in context of the larger goals. This bubble can be popped, and a discussion can be generated where team members' individual contributions can be put in the context of the team's collective contribution. Likewise, it can be powerful to put the team's collective contribution in the context of the overall organization's success. If done properly, individual members will identify more strongly with their team and organization, resulting in lasting motivation towards their task.

Conversation Trumps Activities: Perhaps the most critical goal of any team building exercise is that contact is generated between team members. This includes understanding team member's needs, their frustrations, successes, and identifying any issues that might exist between team members. Put simply, the objectives of team-building are to raise collective awareness of team processes, dynamics and existing or potential blockages. In some cases, this will bring conflict to the surface. Conflict, in the case, is a good thing. It is an opportunity for the impacted parties to express their frustrations, and it presents an excellent opportunity for the leader to get a better understanding of the dynamics between team members and move towards resolution. It is the leader's responsibility to ensure that any conflict that is raised is resolved in a productive manner.

Connect Activities with Work: Although activities may be fun, too often no explicit connection is ever drawn between the activities and the actual work that is done. This is the most common mistake made in any team building session, and when it occurs team members struggle to translate the day's activities back to their work environment. Even worse, many team members will see the day as a waste, as their workload has increased due to the time spent away from their daily activities. If activities are planned, make sure that they are thoroughly processed, and give the team a chance to connect it back to current work events.

Although it is ideal to have an objective outsider with expertise in team and organizational dynamics, a team building event can still be successful provided that enough time has been invested in the planning process. Following these six strategies will increase the chances of achieving your objectives.