

What is Team Building?

by Frank J. Whyte

Team Building was most succinctly described by American statistician W. Edwards Deming. Deming was dispatched to Tokyo to assist in Japan's postwar recovery, and he began by urging recovering Japanese corporations to:

- Create an atmosphere of trust and support,
- Encourage two-way communication, and
- Promote teamwork and interrelationships.

Deming's ideas germinated within the ashes of a devastated economy, and grew to become the central philosophy of Japan's recovery.

The Japanese culture was quick to adopt-and successfully implement-Deming's team ideology.

In the western world, where interpersonal allegiances aren't as engrained, the true "team concept" has proven more challenging.

Perhaps because we understand the need for teamwork-but don't find it as culturally comfortable as Japanese business did-Americans have invented a variety of definitions and solutions that we label "team building."

Team Building as a Play Date

In searching for a team building panacea, outdoor activities became the rage in the 80's. This was before the Americans with Disabilities Act, when it seemed acceptable to enjoin employees to climb rocks and run obstacle courses.

Although these outdoor activities were enjoyable, they seldom attained measurable goals or objectives. The best justification

involved "demonstrating mutual support." However, since no change of behavior resulted from the demonstrations, this message proved interesting but not useful.

Remarkably, the expensive lessons in team "activities" continue even today. In its April, 2002 issue, Business 2.0 magazine listed a team building event as Number Two on its list of the 101 Dumbest Moments in Business:

"A dozen Burger King marketing execs suffer first- and second-degree burns while walking over hot coals as part of a team-building retreat..."

(Only the Enron debacle scored higher on Business 2.0's list.)

The "play date" concept of team building lost its luster when savvy executives recognized it for what it was. This fad, however, cast a shadow over the entire concept of team building, stunting American business' ability to advance effective team concepts.

This is not to say that a team retreat shouldn't include team recreation. Our company regularly partners with an event planner to ensure that our team development programs take place in conjunction with social and recreational activities. When combined, the learning and entertainment aspects of the programs create a well-rounded team development experience.

Team Building as Anti-Venom

One of those humor lists now making the e-mail rounds quotes a Fortune 500 manager as saying, "Teamwork is a lot of people doing what I say."

Whether apocryphal or authentic, the above statement exemplifies the tendency to view team building as a panacea: A correction for

mediocre management or a defective organizational culture.

In its best form, team building isn't an antibiotic; it is a vitamin. It doesn't attempt to cure afflicted teams. It takes relatively healthy teams to a higher level of vitality.

If poor leadership or an adverse environment hinders a team, team building certainly won't cure the underlying illness.

In conjunction with a goal-oriented team development program, it's useful to look at the whole of the team experience: Is management competent and committed to team success? Does the work environment nourish team subsistence? Are there toxins-human or cultural-that will prevent a team from thriving?

Team building is an essential component for organizational success. It is not the sole component.

Team Building Should Support Organizational Objectives

If the team concept is to prove successful, team building needs to involve learning, interpersonal growth, and a change in personal perspective.

Our organization uses MBT[®], an assessment tool that brings personal awareness to the forefront.

This assessment, in conjunction with a relevant workshop, ensures that members of a team understand different styles of perceiving information, communicating, and making decisions. The workshop demonstrates that interpersonal differences aren't assaults or conflicts. In fact, these differences are sources of strength for an effective team.

This isn't a touchy-feely encounter session. Our clients don't have the time, money or patience for that (and neither do we). It is a

goal-oriented team development experience: One that increases communication potential and sets-aside common sources of conflict.

Within a reasonably functional team environment, this understanding helps ensure that members of a team can work together more effectively, leveraging team relationships based upon understanding and respect.

This isn't a program that we recommend because we use it: It is the program we use because we've found it to be successful.

Choosing a Team Building Provider

When choosing from the myriad of team development programs available, be sure to ask the provider some tough questions:

- What are the learning objectives for this program?
- Six months from now, what will participants be able to do that they can't do now?
- How will this program support our organization's cultural development?

If you get general, "sales pitch" explanations, keep shopping.

Solid, meaningful Team Building is essential to a forward-thinking business environment. It isn't a cure-all, and it shouldn't be a day in the park. Ideally, choose a program that brings real, interpersonal skills to your team. Look for practical, results-oriented programs. Then, by all means, schedule a boat ride at the end of the day.