

**Ready. Set. Go.** When workers gel as a unified team, it's all upside say experts and companies that take group dynamics seriously.

# Better team, better business

Jonathan Willcocks clearly knows a thing or two about change management and what it takes to build effective teams.

Twelve years ago, the former schoolteacher and wilderness guide, who helped young offenders see the world through a new lens, underwent his own transformation, emerging as a sought-after facilitator reputed for helping companies and their employees work better together.

Today, his firm's client list includes McDonalds, HSBC, Pfizer, YPO International, Toyota, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), EA Sports and other majors.

So why is Willcocks's small, Vancouver-based firm, Pinnacle Pursuits, in such hot demand? For starters, his clients take team building seriously.

"People bring me in because they know I'm going to help them consider new processes and ways of looking at things, and achieve clarity and direction," he says.

Using nature as a preferred metaphor, Willcocks advocates 'learning by doing.'

"We'll often take people out of their work environment – it could be in a city park, the wilderness or other location – and create spaces for them to take risks, express themselves and move forward," he says.

While Pinnacle Pursuits' approach often involves constructive play, Willcocks says don't confuse his firm's

work with river rafting and golf companies that show clients a good time and call it team building.

"The difference is in the deeper learning and change management – taking risks, building trust, growing. You can't grow without change, and you can't change without taking risks," he says.

Willcocks begins with an in-depth consultation to define a firm's concerns and goals. "I created a qualitative diagnostic tool that helps identify where gaps lie. It starts with redefining visions, values and beliefs. That's when clients often discover what they really need and want."

The next step is to help staff members reconnect with one another and their company's values and vision.

"We have developed a series of learning events (skill-building workshops) that we pair with experiential, action-based activities that are analogous to what a group wants to learn." The latter can be as simple as building balloon towers to a challenging "high ropes" exercise or an eco adventure.

For Willcocks's clients, games like these are all business.

Phil Goddard, co-owner of B.C.-based commercial building contractor Pacific Rim Services, says, "We manage 60 to 80 jobs a year. The client experience has to be same each time: how you dress on site, how you treat customers, how each job is executed. That's why we take the time to train –

to instill and reinforce our core values, our roles and how we serve our customers."

Pacific Rim's performance suggests Goddard and his business partner Dwayne Stewart are on the right track. For several years running, their firm has been named on Profit Magazine's top 100 list of Canada's Fastest Growing Companies.

"You can make a decision to let growth overtake you, or to grow strategically," says Goddard, adding that no matter how qualified or talented people are and how good a company's systems are, the vagaries of human nature and complexities inherent to interpersonal relationships make uniting a group "an adventure."

Each quarter, Pacific Rim closes its office for one day of training and team building.

Last year, Willcocks developed an adventure day at Vancouver's Grouse Mountain complete with a GPS scavenger hunt that promoted teamwork and leadership training. In this exercise, teams used a GPS to find wilderness checkpoint locations where they discovered and addressed customer-service-related challenges.

This spring, Willcocks led various exercises that assembled teams, each consisting of about eight Pacific Rim employees from various departments. One task was a word problem involving a tricky twist.

Each team was given a ping-pong

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ball with a scrambled word written on it. The ball was then dropped into the bottom of a four-foot-tall perforated tube closed at one end. The objective: to fill the leaky tube, adding one cup of lake water at a time, and thus float the ball to the top of the tube and gain a chance of retrieving the ball and unscrambling the word.

“It was a simple challenge, but it was very revealing how differently five teams approached the task,” says Goddard. “You had to strategize and use all the systems you have. The people who use lateral thinking, stick to the plan and get the job done are the ones who got this job done quickest. Those who hadn’t thought it through had water leaking all over the place.”

Shannon Kidd, communications manager at Future Shop, says twice annually the company hosts its GMs and district and regional team leaders from across Canada for three-day gatherings that combine strategy, reward and training.

“One of our values is to have fun while being the best. For these conferences we choose great settings – from Whistler to Montreal – places in Canada that our team leaders might not otherwise get to visit on their own.

Part of Kidd’s job is to develop content for the events – material that will educate and inspire Future Shop’s senior managers and provide them with tools to take back to their stores.

She says, “Our job is to include as many different forms of learning as we can.” In a bid to add variety to the program and avoid the traditional

“eight hours of flip charts and presentations,” she says, “we brought Pinnacle in to help challenge our managers’ comfort zones.”

The theme of last year’s fall conference, held in Banff, was ‘own the holidays.’

“It was at a time when the first signs of the economic downturn were beginning to show,” explains Kidd. “We met that challenge by executing extremely highly on what we can control – the customer experience, as opposed to the economy.”

Among the exercises, Willcocks’s team tasked the senior managers with building a “high-tech” product assembled from a ball, some chop sticks and other bits and pieces, and then define its benefits and sell it to other members of the group.

“These GMs’ stores generate between \$20 million to \$50 million in sales annually, and employ 50 to 100 people. This exercise helped our senior leaders put themselves in the shoes of our product experts, who work on the sales floors of our stores. It was about igniting energy.”

Kidd says the event garnered high ratings. “The high-energy exercises helped our managers retain more. That was a win.”

While feedback was strong, Kidd admits team

building isn’t always easy. “One of our biggest challenges is getting people to participate fully and challenge their own thinking. A small faction of our team would rather just download the info and figure out how to execute on their own.”

Willcocks says it’s a common issue. “Some people within groups might feel impatient,” he says. “Others want the results, but might not feel they have the time for the process. But in fact that process is often as or more important than the outcome.”

Regardless, Kidd says bringing Future Shop’s senior team together provides inherent benefits. “Uniting this group of people and finding common ground, and providing opportunities for mentorship led by tenured GMs and district managers helps the entire team see what ‘great’ looks like.”

Goddard agrees, “You have to invest in your team. You have to lead and build a culture based on core values.

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And, as in sports, in business the best teams typically win. ■

### The mark of a great team

Successful leaders know it pays to invest in building strong and motivated teams. Hosting professionally led team building exercises is one way to ensure employees remain energized and aligned with an organization’s values and goals. An important next step is to reinforce and convey team spirit by outfitting staff in corporate wear that employees can wear with pride. For more information, visit [www.imagewear.ca](http://www.imagewear.ca)