

create people power in your organization

BY SUE SHERLOCK

8 situations where experiential teambuilding is effective

1. Creating cohesion and improving group dynamics.
2. Introducing new concepts and strategies.
3. Maximizing creativity and innovative thinking.
4. Enhancing communication skills.
5. Merging new teams effectively.
6. Hiring and training staff by assessing individual and group strengths.
7. Managing change associated with upsizing, downsizing and re-direction.
8. Motivating and inspiring staff.

— Submitted by
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Three years ago, staff in the financial department of The Spectra Group of Great Restaurants was facing a period of upheaval and pressure.

A new accounting system was due to be installed during a period of runaway growth for the group which includes The Bread Garden, Milestone's, The Boathouse and Romano's Macaroni Grill restaurants. Headquartered in Vancouver, Spectra operates 46 restaurants and 67 express locations in B.C., Ontario and Washington State and has 2,500 employees.

"Change causes all kinds of emotional responses in people, like stress and anxiety, and we wanted to be proactive and work towards giving this financial group the skills they needed in order to be successful during that change," says Shauna Grinke, the company's director of human resources.

So she sent a group of about 20 of their "numbers people, the least touchy-feely and most pragmatic in the firm," on a two-day program specially designed to build their sense of team, communications skills and interpersonal relationships. Among other activities, accountants, their CFO and clerks found themselves working in teams to create links from A to B with hats, balls, scarves and TV dinner trays.

"The items were set up to be too short and pushed the teams to problem solve. Some people said it was a stupid game, while others got frustrated. It was in fact a metaphor for a work experience — frequently at work you don't have all the resources to get your job done, whether it's scarce people or lack of equipment — and we were looking at how they responded to that and what strategies could be more effective," says Grinke. The exercise was one of many in which staff could work out strategies to take back to their workplace, she adds.

And did the program work? "The great story is that we have that new computer system in and it absolutely went smoothly. People are connected as a team and it all started with that," says Grinke.

She specifically went shopping for a teambuilding company where the emphasis was on adventure and an experiential or "doing-it" type of learning. "There are lots of folks that would chuckle over it and say it's not real training because we're not actually sitting in a boardroom writing stuff on a flip chart, but the best

way to learn is actually through doing something rather than being told or reading about it."

Since that first group, Grinke has sent hundreds of employees, from chefs to management teams, through adventure teambuilding programs held in Vancouver, Whistler and Vancouver Island.

Employees have played "trust falls" games (pairing up with a partner and falling back into their arms from a height of up to six feet), participated in high ropes training (climbing 40 feet up a tree and then crossing an "Indiana Jones-style" bridge), jumped off 30-foot-tall poles and grabbed a trapeze, carried out orienteering exercises in wilderness parks and engaged in simple "capture the flag" games.

Grinke says key to the success of any program is to have a very clear idea of your objectives in doing the training — building skills such as trust, communication and leadership or changing negative staff interactions. "A lot of companies can take you out to play. There has to be a strong link back to work situations."

According to local organizational consultant and Stanford-qualified psychologist Elizabeth Muehlchen of Newton and Co., many businesses spend time teambuilding, but waste their money through common mistakes which she labels "too little, too lame and too late."

"Some might put on a lovely dinner or boat cruise, but it's more about pleasant rewards than active teambuilding," she explains. "Efforts are too lame when they're not tied to an organization's needs and don't carry over into the workplace. And sometimes efforts are just too late. I often get calls when teams have already crumbled and there's so much bad history that no amount of teambuilding is going to help."

In adventure-based teambuilding programs, founded in "learning by doing," the situations created are metaphors for what happens in the workplace, whether that is a breakdown in communications, lack of cooperation or loss of trust, she says. "People get to practise the skills they are learning and are more likely to maintain a change in strategy or approach back at work."

The element of adventure allows for change to happen, she adds. "New leaders emerge and you see people in a completely different light as you shift out of the usual roles." ■