

Strengthen the knot

The latest MICE teambuilding options

You've heard the term. You know what it means. You've even tried it out with your staff. But what is the best way to ensure team building really benefits your organisation? *HRM* talks to the experts to find out

It's a familiar employee retreat exercise: a team assembles in a circle around one volunteer, who is asked to close his eyes, cross his arms and tip forward without buckling his knees. The responsibility lies with the other team members to catch him and gently push him in a different direction, where others break his fall and guide him away in a similar fashion. Known as the "trust fall," this is just one of many exercises meant to create a spirit of bonding, closeness and confidence amongst team members.

But can employers go further?

In March this year, a group of 65 Inverness Medical Innovations employees from all over the world gathered in Ocean Park, Hong Kong for a motivational exercise. The expected outcome, according to Gary Cheng, Director Strategic Marketing, Mergers and Acquisitions, was to energise staff to meet sales targets during a tough 2009, and to share the company's core values. He engaged Anergy Fun Engineers to help build the bonds. "People felt closer and I think we showed them that the company was willing to invest in them." The exercises – which include going through some *Amazing Race*-style adventures and difficult mazes – were revolutionary in terms of their approach to growth, says Cheng.

With companies struggling to provide incentives during the economic recession, and morale sinking as a result, the search for new and economical motivational tactics is on. Some of the best team building exercises have already been invented and are ready to be adapted to each new organisation.

Take the facilities on Bintan Island, Indonesia, for example. The destination offers everything from scaling rock walls to go-kart racing when it comes to building rapport and camaraderie within corporate teams. The purpose-built Focus Adventure Training Centres host a range of outdoor activities. Or for real adventure and very necessary teamwork, visitors to Bintan Resorts can take part in All-Terrain Vehicle tours across the island's rugged landscape. Or pick a fight with the boss in on a strategic paintball skirmish.

No matter what the activity, the objectives of team building experiences are simple: clarifying staff goals, resolving issues and building relationships. Ideally, team building takes place away from the office setting completely, allowing staff to interact with each other in an outside context.

The definitions of what a team building exercise is can also be fairly loose. For some companies, a friendly bowling match may suffice, while others prefer engaging a specialist to provide a structured and specific goal-oriented experience. The duration of a series of sessions also varies according to the company's goals. David Simpson, Director, Team Building Asia, says, team building can take place over several days where comprehensive follow-up is required. Or it may be a large scale event for one day, where fun and interactive activities replicate meaningful business simulations, requiring a shorter debriefing."

Whatever the duration or intensity, the purpose of team building is derived from the concept that people perform in more creative and beneficial ways when working in teams, rather than in constant isolation. Team building fosters a sense of support in a simulated environment while imparting

new skills in an experiential context.

The benefits are numerous. Team building helps to hone soft skills which have an immediate impact on productivity. Synergised staff are less likely to be distracted by interpersonal conflicts, for example. Communication also becomes enhanced. According to Ramesh Muthusamy, Head of Corporate Training, Adam Khoo Learning Technologies, team building also allows staff to get to know their colleagues on a deeper level. It improves their ability and willingness to deal candidly with problem issues, while challenging members to acknowledge their blind spots.

A range of options

HR professionals who want staff to participate in a team building exercise must make several considerations before proceeding. When it comes to arranging any staff activity outside the office, starting from scratch can be tedious. With the added pressure of expecting positive results from a learning experience, the task can also become daunting. It is at this point where employers sometimes dismiss team building efforts, seeing them as too much hassle for what is essentially a staff day off with no real production. But that narrow view can leave an organisation with the status quo, denying staff an important opportunity to improve.

A good place to begin is a standard needs assessment, identifying problems or situations which could benefit from team building. This can be done on a small scale or you can take a broader approach and make it an inter-departmental effort. Simpson suggests conducting a survey to find out what employees need, and how they are willing to find solutions through team building.

Some areas to evaluate are the factors which have resulted in conflict in the past; how to improve team members' interactions with one another; how to create support, and most importantly, how to apply team building activities in the company's day-to-day operations.

Alvin Quah, Manager, Anergy Fun Engineers, says certain situations and organisational cultures naturally demand employers to engage staff in team building. "Newly set-up, merged, acquired departments, those that have recently undergone major changes, and those seeing a high turnover or high growth, so they're seeing new faces" all stand to benefit.

Team building shouldn't just be seen as a solution to potential problems. A company which is doing well can also maintain its high performance and further strengthen staff with team building activities. It can also be used as an incentive for staff or a celebration of recent successes. If a company is having a difficult time deciding what types of activities are appropriate for their particular circumstances, engaging a specialist is a viable option.

Challenges and pitfalls

Getting your staff excited and engaged about team building can be difficult, especially in an organisation where relationships may be strained. Management might also contribute to the problem if it doesn't make expectations clear. HR can run into problems when it comes to customising activities to suit different age demographics and educational backgrounds.

Sometimes employees lack interest because the team building session is poorly-timed. In the downturn, more employees are working past their office hours, so they're hard-pressed to find time to participate in extra activities during the week. HR sometimes resorts to scheduling an activity over the weekend but Quah says this should be avoided. "Most Singaporeans still see team building programmes as work-related training," he explains.

The conditions surrounding a team building session can also be problematic. Fearing staff may feel forced into attending a glorified training session, some managers don't make it mandatory. The result is only those already boasting a positive mindset turn up. HR must do everything to ensure full attendance so all intended participants are brought together.

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*Alvin Quah, Manager,
Anergy Fun Engineers*

Experts say that the best team building activities are those which strike a balance between action and reflection, allowing members to interact as meaningfully as possible. It's important that key members of management are present to promote cohesiveness. The delivery of a programme – whether by an outside facilitator or a member of HR – should be enthusiastic, setting a high level of energy to boost the others. **HRM**

Case study:

Building Toyota's team

In 2001, Toyota suspended production at one of its plants in Turkey for 10 months. Workers were placed in various programmes to rebuild their relationships and develop a sense of belonging to the organisation. Not long after it reopened, the factory began to earn some of the best quality and productivity ratings in the company.

One of the core exercises included skills and responsibilities testing, after which knowledge of both increased at least 30% on average. A physical exercise regime was also implemented for staff. The result? More employees became limber enough to return to the assembly line at a moment's notice. Shifts in the company culture were also noted, as mutual respect was reinforced.