

TEAM SCHEMES

TEAMS CAN BE BUILT IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS. BUT **DOMINI STUART** FINDS THERE ARE GENERIC PRACTICES FOR UNITING AND GETTING THE BEST OUT OF A GROUP, AND THESE CAN BE APPLIED TO DIFFERENT BUSINESS SITUATIONS

AS FAR BACK AS THE 1920s, Elton Mayo was looking into the relationship between human factors and productivity. In his classic Hawthorne studies of the 1930s he found that the most significant factor was a sense of group identity, the feeling of support and cohesion that came with increased worker interaction. In other words, productivity improved when people worked as a team.

Employers began to acknowledge the importance of team spirit, and looked for ways to create it. The activities that emerged to meet their needs included everything from harsh, military-style boot camps to touchy-feely emotional bonding. Today, while the range of activities is wider than ever, professionals tend to take a middle course. And, despite having no clear definition beyond 'something that helps improve a team's performance', team building is now firmly established as an integral part of management practice. But is it really a worthwhile investment?

Rachael Seymour has no doubt that it is. As area leader at a regional Flight Centre, she

organised for teams to climb Borneo's Mount Kinabalu, hike on Cradle Mountain, and kayak through the Whitsundays. She was so impressed with the outcomes that the two businesses she founded, Cornerstone People Solutions and the Retail Leadership Academy, both incorporate team-building activities into leadership, sales, and service training.

"At Flight Centre I moved from managing a team of six to a group of 100," she says. "My experience with small numbers taught me that a good, solid, united team can achieve anything they want to. It really is true that the power of a team is far greater than the individual parts."

Kathy Angelidis runs boutique corporate hospitality and events company akEvents. Many of the events she organises include team-building activities, and she, too, was inspired by experiences on the other side of the fence. In her former role as sales and marketing manager for a multinational pharmaceutical company, she regularly participated in team-building activities at both state sales meetings and national sales conferences.

"In my experience, a sales and marketing team typically consists of a diverse range of individuals, all working independently on a day-to-day basis," she says. "It can be hard to feel that you're really part of a team, that you can rely on each other for support."

Angelidis found that team-building activities gave each member an opportunity to demonstrate leadership skills as well as identify each other's strengths and weaknesses. "We also learned to respect all personality types, and this helped strengthen the bond between us and enhanced our ability to work on specific team goals," she says. "I always found it interesting to observe the different characters that evolved throughout the course and how we worked together to get the best out of each individual. It brought a strong feeling of teamwork and purpose to the group and gave us invaluable insight as to how we could capitalise on our capabilities in the future."

PULLING TOGETHER

Four times Olympian and triple medallist, Bo Hanson, has a rare insight into team dynamics. He was a member of the UTS Coxless Four, and founded his company Team8 to share the experience.

"Rowing is the ideal way to greater levels of trust as you learn about a team's strengths and address its limitations," he says. "It takes people out of their comfort zones in a safe but highly engaging way. The culture at the boathouse and in the rowing boat demands that successful communication strategies and a common language are created and shared. And, when you're rowing in a boat together, you can physically feel the difference between being in and out of sync with each other."

Hanson also understands the need for a measurable outcome. "However great the activity, it needs to be combined with diagnostic tools and assessments which can measure the team's starting point and then how far they've come," he says. "That gives them a great sense of satisfaction. Improvement is a fundamental need for any individual or team and leads to feelings of personal esteem, accomplishment

and morale. This brings greater staff engagement and improved ongoing performances.”

We tend to assume that team building will include some kind of physical challenge, but Wendy Mak provides a very different experience. A personal and corporate stylist, she began by specialising in wardrobe consultations and shopping trips for women. Now her biggest growth area is team-building activities based around corporate dressing and grooming.

“There is a strong correlation between how employees dress, groom, and present themselves, and the perception clients have of a company,” she says. “A well-dressed and well-presented employee is the first and lasting impression your clients receive of you and your business. It garners more respect and makes business communication and negotiation more equal between you and your client.”

While generally skewed towards women, Mak’s style of team building is increasingly popular with men. “We learn together, individually and as a team, how we can best present ourselves in the business that we represent,” she says. “The learning around dressing, grooming, and presentation helps to build confidence, and confidence is a benefit that stays with someone for a long time.”

When it comes to measuring ROI, it can be useful to look at ‘hard’ metrics such as increased productivity, output and sales and reduced absenteeism. However, Mak also sees value in more qualitative assessments. “There is a lot to be gained from talking

to a team or individual team members,” she says. “You could encourage them to discuss their concerns and feelings before an activity, then repeat the process afterwards to see whether there is an increase in overall positivity. For example, do they feel more confident in themselves, their team or their manager? Do they think they understand their team members better?

“Anonymous surveys are also a great way to measure the

effectiveness of the activity. They’re easy to implement and a great way to gauge how it was received by the team.”

Seymour saw measurable increases in total sales and profits as well as a dramatic improvement in staff retention. “When I took on the role of area leader, the staff turnover was 36 percent. After two years, it was down 17 percent,” she says. “I know now that people perform better and are more likely to stay if they feel valued and that their contribution matters.”

When team building is on the horizon, it’s easy to focus entirely on which activity to choose. The excitement of the event can certainly be a great motivator but, if you’re looking for a meaningful return on your investment, you might want to view it more as an important starting point than as an end in itself.

Most committed professionals will encourage you to take the longer view. Hanson, for example, creates transfer activities designed to anchor the experience of a training day. These include providing each participant with an action plan for use when they’re back in the workplace. “We help them to create team goals,” he says. “Each member needs to fulfil an obligation to further both self development and the development of the team.”

Piet Croes, director of Halcyon Consultancy, also factors two follow-up sessions into the cost of his programs. “The key to keeping a change process going is to put into the system,” he says. “People forget what they learned, and new people are coming in all the time. If it’s left to human motivation, the learning will be gone within six months.”

Consolidating change and incorporating learning can also be sticking points for a company trying to go it alone. “A lot of the processes aren’t rocket science, they can easily be picked up, bastardised and duplicated, even learnt straight from a book,” says Croes. “Qualified interpretation and experienced support of the process make the difference between a fun activity and an effective training experience.” ●

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GOING IT ALONE

Remember, team building doesn't have to cost the earth. In fact, if it is followed up with meaningful activities and change, something as simple as regular, lunchtime drinks, a quiz night or family picnic could be more effective than an overseas adventure holiday with no follow-up. Whichever activity you choose, if it isn't a comfortable fit with the everyday reality of your working environment, your people are more likely to feel disillusioned, cynical and let down than motivated, energised and supported.

- Start with the basics, making sure that everyone understands the purpose of the team and each member's role and responsibilities.
- Establish and agree on a decision-making process, strategies for managing conflict and preferred methods of communication.
- Involve the whole team when you're planning an activity.
- Before the activity takes place, develop a clear strategy for integrating the benefits over the long term.
- Don't just pay lip service to teamwork. Make it part your business culture by consistently rewarding collaboration above individual success day to day.
- Recruit with a view to finding people who share your values and are committed to your vision.
- Hold regular meetings to review progress and to identify and resolve any issues between team members.
- Build trust by encouraging honesty and open communication.
- When something goes wrong, look to the system rather than focusing on mistakes made by individuals.
- Teach by example—you're part of the team too.
- Be prepared to step back and trust the team process.

SCORING YOUR TEAM

- **Define the need.** What is the large, desired outcome? What do you want to improve? Eliminate? Change?
- **Recruit the right people.** Find the talent that is willing to commit to your vision. Choose members who represent a broad range of backgrounds, skills and abilities, and a mix of cultural and professional viewpoints.
- **Shared values.** Not only must team members embrace your mission, they must also share your values. Effective teams demand close collaboration, trust, honesty, passion and genuine appreciation for each member's contribution.
- **Develop common goals.** Winning teams thrive in an environment where they can unite in a common and compelling purpose, such as a cause everyone can understand, identify with and commit to.
- **Set ground rules.** Make sure team members understand why the team exists and know the role each member plays. They need to know how decisions will be made, how to deal with conflict, how to communicate, and how results will be measured.
- **Communicate.** Ensure team members communicate openly and honestly, refrain from personal assaults and stay focused on the task.
- **Promote curiosity.** Curiosity, and the search for new solutions, fuels every great group. Members are engaged in a process of discovery that serves as its own reward.
- **Keep score.** A team must be committed to constant improvement, which means you have to measure performance.
- **Reward.** Acknowledge individual achievement during group meetings and compliment the team as a whole on working well together. Highlight interim successes with mini-celebrations. People repeat performance that garners reward and recognition.
- **Back off.** If you've implemented the above steps correctly, then get out of the way. Trust the team process, even if you think you know better. Nothing undermines a team faster than for their moves to be trumped.

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