



WHY TEAM BUILDING WEEKENDS FAIL (AND HOW TO MAKE YOURS SUCCEED)

Somewhere in the world this afternoon, a group of office mates are strapping on safety equipment and preparing to scale the side of a cliff together. In another city, another group of mates is engaged in a retreat designed to foster their sense of teamwork. Late at night in yet another town, six men who usually compete in the office are cooperating on building a robot. What do they all have in common?

The phrase is team building, and it has come to represent a way of doing business that takes into account the strengths and weaknesses of each member of a workgroup. The basic concept of team building weekends is to bring a group of coworkers together and, by subjecting them to various hardships, events and activities, cement them into a team that supports each other and works together toward a common goal.

The only problem with that scenario is that all too often, it doesn't work. Once the group is back at the office, they fall back into the old ways of working and the team building weekend is no more than a fond memory. The problem is not in the concept of team building, but in the notion that it can be accomplished in a weekend, no matter what that weekend entails. It's not that team building weekends are a bad idea - it's that they're expected to do a job that should be undertaken in your office, every workday of the year. The purpose of a team building event should be to introduce, reinforce and reward, not to single-handedly forge a group of coworkers into a team. If it's used to replace the work your company (or you as a manager) should be doing every day, then you're missing out on some important points - and the major benefits of dragging everyone out of the office for a weekend of exhilarating and challenging activities.

So how do you forge the bonds of a team if not by dipping them into the crucible of a team building weekend? In simple street terms, you can't just talk the talk - you have to walk the walk. If you want your staff to believe they're a team and function as a team, then you have to treat them as a team - and yourself as an important member of it.

- Communication is the key to building a team.

o- The single biggest mistake that 'management' makes is failure to communicate. Your company doesn't have to be an open book to all employees, but sharing goals and intentions gives employees a sense that they are a part of a larger team working toward a specific purpose.

- Build teamwork into the work flow.

o- In order to work as a team, people need to be treated as one. Start each project with a team conference to define and refine goals. Create a central 'lounge' area where team members are comfortable grabbing coffee in the morning - and taking a few moments to catch up on things together. Hold regular team meetings where team members can report progress and delays so that no one feels left out of the loop.

- Make recognition of achievement a priority.

o- Recognizing achievement is important to reinforcing the team feeling. It needn't be formal - in fact, informal and unexpected recognition can be very potent. A word in passing in the hallway, a moment taken to pass on praise from a client while having a cup of coffee, a casual 'great work on that proposal, guys' at the end of a meeting are all part of the teamwork frame.

- Make time to play as a team, too.

o- Whether the play is a softball team, a bowling league or a semi-annual weekend where the team members can really stretch their wings, teams work best when they have something in common besides their work. A trek up a snowy mountainside builds shared memories that help cement the bonds that have formed throughout the year.