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50. Team-building exercises. Planning activities that actually work

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Introduction: Too often, managers plan their activity with no real thought or goal in mind. This tends to be a waste of time, and managers risk to lose the team's respect when they plan an exercise that doesn't actually help those involved.

Team-building exercises can be a powerful way to unite a group, develop strengths, and address weaknesses – but only if the exercises are planned and carried out strategically. In other words, there has to be a real purpose behind your decision to do the exercise, for example, improving the team's problem-solving or creativity skills rather than because you felt like giving your people a nice day out of the office.

Resources and methods: This article shows what to consider when planning a team event, and we offer a variety of exercises to address different issues that teams commonly face.

Results: The most important step when planning a team-building exercise comes at the very beginning: you must start by figuring out what challenges your team faces. And then you can choose exercises that will be effective in helping them to solve these issues.

Spend time thinking about your team's current strengths and weaknesses. Ask yourself these questions to identify the root of any problem:

- Are there conflicts between certain people who create splits within the team?
- Do team members need to get to know one another?
- Do some members focus on their own success and harm the group as a result?
- Are some members resistant to change and does this affect the group's ability to move forward?

If you would like to test how well you and your team work together, try Team Effectiveness Assessment. Once you've identified the causes of your team's issues, you can plan exercises that will address these problems. This will help your team to derive real benefit from the event – and feel that it was worth their while.

There are literally hundreds of team-building exercises that address a wide range of issues. We've separated just a few basic, straightforward examples into sections that focus on the most common challenges for teams.

Here are some basic exercises you could try, if you're faced with issues of communication, stereotyping, or trust in your team.

- **Back-to-Back Drawing** – Divide your group into pairs, and each pair has to sit on the floor back to back. Give one person a picture of a shape, and the other person a pencil and pad of paper. Ask the people holding the pictures to give verbal instructions to their partners on how to draw the shape without telling the partners what the shape is. After they've finished, ask each pair to compare their original shape with the actual drawing, and consider the following questions: how well did the first person describe the shape; how well did the second person interpret the instructions; were there problems with both the sending and receiving parts of the communication process?

- **Survival Scenario** – This exercise forces your group to communicate and agree to ensure their 'survival.' Tell your group that their airplane has just crashed in the ocean. There's a desert island nearby, and there's a room on the lifeboat for every person plus 12 items they'll need to survive on the island. Instruct the team to choose the items they want to take. How do they decide?

- **Human spring** – Ask group members to stand facing each other in pairs. Their elbows should be bent, with their palms facing toward each other. Instruct them to touch their palms together, and gradually start leaning toward each other, so that they eventually hold each other up. Then, instruct everyone to move their feet further and further back, so that they have to depend solely upon their partners to remain standing. Effective team building needs to happen continuously if you want your group to be successful. It needs to be part of the corporate culture.

Make sure that your team-building exercises aren't competitive. Think about it – competition tends to make one person or team work against another. This probably isn't a good way to build team spirit and unity. More likely, it's a way to divide a group.

Many companies use sports for team-building activities. Yes, baseball and soccer can be fun, and some people will enjoy it. But these activities can do far more harm than good if they focus just on competing, and they can really de-motivate people who are not particularly good at these sports. Plan an event that makes people dependent from others to succeed and stay away from competition.

Conclusions: For team building to be effective, leaders should first identify the issues their group is facing. Then they can plan activities to address these challenges directly and make sure that the team will actually gain some benefits from the event. Keep competition out of the exercises and aim to make team building part of the daily corporate culture instead of a once-a-year event.

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