

Teams That Last

*Team building takes place inside
and outside of the workplace*



The staff of *Arizona Business Magazine* enjoys a Cactus League baseball game at Phoenix Municipal Stadium in Phoenix. In addition to sharing the embarrassment of mugging for the occasional company picture, *Arizona Business Magazine's* team building efforts include braving the white water rapids of the Verde River and taking in the occasional matinee movie.

by **Cynthia Scanlon**

photo by **Jim Marshall**

The concept of team building through the use of adventure games, water rafting, rock climbing and intellectual group games is gaining in popularity on the small business and corporate front. Where once companies might have gone away for an afternoon of intensive meetings and seminars, business leaders are now recognizing the importance of a more "hands-on" approach to building cohesiveness within a department, division or company.

"Businesses realize that for increased performance, the synergism of a team is a lot more effective and productive than the sum of the parts," says Rich Carlson, president of Wilderness Adventures.

Wilderness Adventures, which offers physical team building programs for small businesses and corporations, also offers programs that are intellectually rather than physically based.

"For instance, we do a lot of exercises on brainstorming to drive home the point that one person doesn't have the corner on the market of good ideas," Carlson says. "Five people in a room can come up with a better idea than any one of those people could, if they are working together efficiently."

Traditionally, the law firm of Snell & Wilmer LLP has held educational retreats since 1970 to discuss such topics as corporate law, alternative dispute resolution or new trends in in-house counsel. Last summer, the firm decided to try a formal team building exercise by sending more than 200 lawyers on a wilderness retreat in Tucson. It was a way to acquaint everyone working in their four offices, which cover three states, who might not otherwise get to meet one another.

"With lawyers in particular you have to team build," says John Bouma, chairman of Snell & Wilmer. "This showed us the benefit of working together, and more importantly, it gave people who came in from our other offices an opportunity to spend time together doing things."

The law firm spent the afternoon in such team building exercises as putting eight people on one pair of long skis and then walking them through a slalom course.

"Everyone had to pick up their right leg at the same time and then their left leg," says James Condo, coordinator for the commercial litigation practice group of Snell & Wilmer. "We learned

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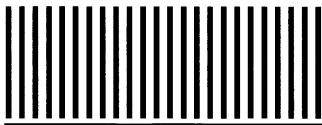
"I looked at my children and thought: they only have me."

I looked at myself and asked: what did I have to offer them? I was on welfare, I had two children and I was single. Having grown up in a migrant farming family, my education was limited. And working where I was, I knew I couldn't give my children the opportunities they deserved. So I listened to a friend. She graduated from a Maricopa Community College, and I knew that if she could do it, so could I. Little did I know that the day I walked through those doors, I had reached a turning point. The Maricopa Community Colleges Foundation paid for most of my tuition with corporate donations. And today, I have an Associates Degree in Office Automation Systems. I have a great job and I'm planning to get my bachelors. I am a functioning, self-reliant individual. Best of all, my children are taking on those values."

"Little did I know that the day I walked through those doors, I had reached a turning point."

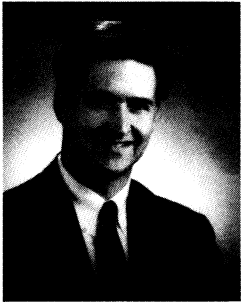
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to rely on each other and work together to bring our individual talents to the team to solve a problem."

One of Bouma's favorite exercises involved the use of a net with various sizes of holes cut into it. "We had to pass each lawyer through the net and we couldn't use the same hole," he says. "So we had to figure out who would fit through what hole, who could lift who and remember not leave the biggest to last because there would be no one left to get them through."

Condo says the exercises were embraced by everyone in the company wholeheartedly.

"It was not what lawyers sometimes

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as well.**

get when they go to meetings and sit in a seminar with someone talking to them about concepts," he says. "It was an opportunity to put the concepts into practice that we've been working with here as a firm."

After the retreat, Condo says people in the firm started meeting more frequently and working together. He also noticed a renewed enthusiasm for the whole team concept.

Cramer-Krasselt Advertising and Public Relations in Phoenix takes its team building concept very seriously by taking all of its employees on a yearly "mystery bus ride" to a destination somewhere in the state during the holidays.

"We are a bus load of people now. We weren't [11 years ago] when we started," says Rolf Normann, executive vice president and general manager. "We try to make it an event for them."

The destination is a secret until the day of the trip. Since the company's employees do not know where they will be going until they get on the bus, many

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have learned to dress in layers to try and guess the weather. The gathering begins with a pep talk from one of Cramer-Krasselt's executive officers and usually a breakfast of sweet rolls or bagels is offered. Then, each employee is given one dollar in cash for every year the company has been in business. Last year, each received \$97.

A few weeks before the trip, names are drawn for gag gifts. Once on the bus, the gifts are exchanged. "The gift should cost around five dollars, and it gets graded on its bad taste," says Normann.

In the 11 years of providing the mystery bus tour, Cramer-Krasselt employees have joined one another on train rides, jeep tours and boat rides. When the day is finished, the company goes to dinner at a nice restaurant and usually returns home by early evening.

"Our employees love it," says Normann. "We have ex-employees around the city that start asking about the trip around September. They say, 'I don't work there anymore, but can I go on the bus trip?'"

It's just these kinds of unusual team building activities that can not only pick up office morale, but raise the bottom line as well. Opitz/Wetherington, LLC, a company that plans and produces business meetings and corporate events, recently held a retreat with a group of 150 people at one of the Disney Properties in Orlando, Florida. Games consisted of teams, which were outfitted in matching T-shirts, competing in relay races.

"We played beach Olympics," says Denise Wetherington, executive planner for Opitz/Wetherington. "We really mixed them up to make sure there were no couples or cronies on the same team. They had a team cheer and were awarded medals."

Wetherington adds, "It really kicked off the session on the right note, got everyone talking and broke the ice. Then we had two or three days of meetings after that."

Desert Voyagers is a team building company specializing in scenic float trips on the lower Salt and Rio Verde rivers. Rather than focusing on physical exercises, Desert Voyagers specializes in social interaction and building teams by getting people acquainted and talking with one another for the day. They accomplish this through activities both on rubber rafts and exercises on land.

"Generally, if people are not used to

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working together, when they start out, they are a little hesitant," says Marsha Blumm of Desert Voyagers. "But by the end of the trip we find people who have never met before are best friends."

Some of Desert Voyagers exercises include hooking two boats together bow to bow and having participants paddle to shore in opposite directions against each other. They also navigate the boats through a slalom course and around tight corners.

"If you're not familiar with paddling or giant rubber rafts, it becomes quite a challenge," Blumm says. "These exercises create a lot of camaraderie at the end of the trip, and that generally carries back to the workplace."

Teams of individuals

It is no secret that America is a nation of individuals. And yet, the team building concept is not only catching on, but is being embraced by companies who know that having a cohesive work

force may mean the difference between a healthy or anemic bottom line. Blumm attributes this trend to people's desire to create good will between themselves.

"I think everyone wants to be able to depend on their neighbor," she says.

Where once companies might have gone away for an afternoon of intensive meetings and seminars, business leaders are now recognizing the importance of a more "hands-on" approach to building cohesiveness within a company.

Snell & Wilmer's Condo agrees. "We felt team building would be a superb complement to the total quality effort that the firm had embarked upon," he says. "We thought this would be an ideal way, in a non-threatening setting to bring home the point that there are many ways to build teams and many things that can be done to create interaction between members of the team."

But not everyone may embrace the adventure concept at first blush. Janice Borovay, president of PEP Enterprises, a company that plans meetings and conferences for corporations around the world, is quick to point out some of the drawbacks to these team building exercises, especially physical ones, that companies need to be sensitive to.

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"You have a lot of people who are happy they did it when it was over, but the anxiety they go through before the program is difficult," she says. "It can be frightening. People feel overwhelming dread that if they don't climb that telephone pole they are going to have a problem with the people they work with. They fear if they don't do it they will lose their job."

Borovay stresses that companies usually have a demographic mix of employees: younger people just starting out, people in their early- to mid-30s who are still trying to move their career forward "and people in their 40s and 50s who have made their career and might be saying, 'Why am I doing this?'"

Wetherington agrees that team building exercises need to match the group's age and physical ability. "It's a

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bad business decision to choose strenuous team building exercises for people who don't get any exercise on the weekends," she says.

However, she is quick to add, "For those people who are middle aged or older who have a little bit more trouble with change, then the exercise is good for them whether they like it or not."

Borovay would like to see companies planning on a team building retreat to think about how to take the experience and feelings of the day or weekend back to the everyday workplace. "Because as soon as you get back to the office, you move back into your learned patterns," she says. "The adventure experience can be a start. If you can take that as a component of building a team, I think that's positive."

Wilderness Adventure's Carlson agrees that the team concept must

translate back to the workplace and that teams are not built in a day. The process can begin with a retreat or river rafting trip, but he says the concept must go further.

"There's the perception that people will come out for the day and miraculously become a team," Carlson says. "But it doesn't work that way. We can illustrate interpersonal skills and how effective a team can be, but they have to go back to the workplace and implement these things."

Carlson adds, "The most important thing a company can do is set performance goals for the team. If everyone buys into the goals and buys into the approach for achieving these goals, then they become a team. And the companies that understand this are doing great."

Borovay also believes an important aspect of any team building endeavor is to look at top management of the people who work within the organization.

"That's where it starts," she says, "at the top. If management doesn't have the team building concept, how can they expect everyone else to have it? You follow your example."

So what are the keys to a successful team building event? Find one or two objectives for the team to meet, make sure the activities fit the ages and physical abilities of your team and see the exercise as a foundation to begin team building dialogue to be carried back to the workplace.

"The objective of planning these programs has to be directed properly or you're not going to achieve results," says Borovay. "People have preconceived notions that have nothing to do with what they originally decided."

She also adds, "Don't make your results impossible to achieve, and a team building exercise can be very successful for what it is."

AB

Cynthia Scanlon is free-lance writer based in Tempe.


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