

Build a More Productive Team

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Forget feel-good fun that fades. Forge a lasting bond among employees with ongoing activities designed to build communication, trust and teamwork.

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If you ask Wally Adamchik, he'll tell you that teambuilding is critical for small business success. He'll also tell you, however, that it's a bunch of bologna.

"When people call me and say, 'We want to do some teambuilding,' I cringe," he says. That's because teambuilding is misunderstood. Too often, he insists, companies approach it as a band-aid—a fleeting exercise that will put a temporary smile on grumpy employees' faces. "Is this a feel-good activity in a feel-bad environment? Or is it a feel-good activity in an already feel-good environment?"

According to Adamchik, author of *No Yelling: The Nine Secrets of Marine Corps Leadership You Must Know to Win in Business*, teambuilding should always be the latter. In the course of writing his book, he interviewed 100 active and former marines about leadership and teamwork and found that in order for teams to be effective, they must first exist in a sustainable, prolific work environment

"Are you talking about an event at the local park," he asks, "or are you talking about treating people with trust and respect in order to accomplish a business objective?" The answer ought to be obvious, he says: Business owners should focus less on enabling friendships and more on building productive working relationships.

So, forget about creating that human pyramid once every quarter in the conference room; instead, start thinking about ways to make you team work harder, better and smarter.

Problems and Solutions

Good, effective teambuilding doesn't happen in a kitchen, learning to roll sushi with your staff. It doesn't happen on a mountainside, either, learning to climb rocks with them. It doesn't even happen outside on the lawn, where you've got your employees falling into one another's arms. According to Greensboro, N.C.-based management consultant Wally Bock, author of *Performance Talk: The One-on-One Part of Leadership* and the *Three Star Leadership* blog, good, effective teambuilding happens exactly where you need it most—in your office.

"Who are the two groups in the world that use teams all the time and seem pretty good at it?" he asks. "One, obviously, is sports. You don't see the Los Angeles Lakers going to cooking school to learn how to be a better basketball team. The other one is the military. The military works constantly in small teams. They train for task; they train for vision. They don't go off and climb rocks for the sake of climbing rocks."

Because teams generally exist for one reason—to accomplish a given goal—team leaders should focus on doing activities that simulate real work while stimulating real results. "If you're going to build a team," Bock says, "you build it by having them work together on the tasks you want them to get good at."

In fact, when it comes to teambuilding, the problem and the solution are often found in the same place. Consider, for instance, why you probably need to do teambuilding in the first place—because your employees aren't hitting the milestones they're supposed to be hitting when they're supposed to be hitting them. Teambuilding activities, then, should be built around achieving those milestones.

"When do you need help?" Bock says. "Either when the conflict level is up or the production level is down." The cause of your problems—whether a lack of resources, communication, trust or teamwork—is also where you need to focus the remedy.

Create Community

Usually, teambuilding problems and solutions are much deeper than they appear, says Renie Cavallari, CEO of Phoenix-based training company Aspire. That's why she prefers community building to teambuilding.

"Teams are functional," she explains. "In a company you have multiple teams—you have an operating team, for instance, and a sales team—and they provide a specific function and a variety of results to the community at large."

Communities, meanwhile, have a higher purpose. "A community engages the entire culture," she says, adding that culture is all about your company's mission and values, and how employees can further that mission and actively exhibit those values. "When you have a community that has a healthy culture, it's like having a healthy heart and soul. It doesn't matter how the outside of the body looks; if you have a lousy heart and soul, life is a difficult task."

According to Cavallari, the best way to build community—and teams, for that matter—is to focus on six distinct pillars of business operations:

- **Connection.** When people feel tightly connected, they perform and work differently—and better—Cavallari says.
- **Communication.** Cavallari recommends "kind talk"—being frank but tactful about conflicts—over "nice talk"—lip service that's intended to spare one's feelings.
- **Compassion.** People work harder when they feel respected and looked out for; focus, therefore, on employee strengths rather than weaknesses.
- **Higher Purpose.** Don't just give your employees work, Cavallari says; give them a mission.
- **Participation.** In order for a team or a community to function, all of its members must contribute.
- **Responsibility and Accountability.** It's not enough for employees to make promises; they must deliver on those promises, too.

"It doesn't matter if you're a community of three, a community of 300 or a community of 3,000," Cavallari says. "Community is really about how you live the six pillars."

Make It Last

Cavallari's pillars help teambuilding companies do something each must desperately do, she says: Keep their team dynamic alive.

"The pillars give companies the language they need for clear communication," she says. She recommends working on a different pillar every week or every month and building activities, staff meetings and discussions around the pillar of the moment.

Most teambuilding efforts die on the vine. The reason, according to Bock? Lack of follow-up. Companies need to contextualize the learning they provide and develop a program for sustaining it long term, which is exactly what makes pillars—or any other similar idea—so effective.

Of course, there's still room for fun—as long as it's relevant. Consider, for instance, these teambuilding ideas that combine sustained learning with entertaining activities:

- **Bond via Intranet.** Nancy A. Shenker, founder and principal of theONswitch, a Westchester, N.Y.-based marketing company, recently implemented a company-wide intranet using Google Docs that her employees use to discuss professional achievements, as well as the occasional funny story. "It forces us to focus on the positive each day," she says. "We get to learn more about each other's priorities, senses of humor and creative thinking styles."
Play a Game. While Shoots and Ladders or Candy Land won't exactly teach your team to work more productively, there are plenty of games that will. One of them is DrawSuccess, a noncompetitive board game invented by Brownell Landrum. During the game, players ask questions that are designed to reveal their personalities and inspire business brainstorming, all in an effort at teaching team members to identify their behavioral profiles and those of their peers. Once the game is over, follow-up programs help employees make continued use of their learning.
Volunteer. CPA Dale A. Walters, CEO of Phoenix-based wealth management firm Keats, Connelly and Associates, builds his team with community service. His office regularly makes full-day donations to charities such as Habitat for Humanity and Ronald McDonald House. "Volunteering is good for teambuilding," he says, "because it builds pride in the organization and we are able to work on projects where people that are not traditionally in charge get to be in charge."