

What is wrong with team-building programs?

By Qaiser Abbas

Almost all HR professionals, management experts and researchers agree that successful organizations are characterized by effective teamwork. Organizations are steadily realizing the importance of developing teams that can work in a coordinated, efficient, and creative manner. With increasing emphasis on producing joint results and success getting contingent on inter-dependence, **team work** has become more or less a necessity.

If you too recognize the need for team development, and are planning some activities for that purpose, you should have some idea of the pitfalls of **team building**, and how to go about it. It doesn't matter whether you hire a consultant to help, or you lead the process yourself, if you know what must be avoided, there are good chances of your success.

Team building programs are considered to be a vehicle to achieve this objective. However, many team building programs fail generate the right outcomes because there are inherent mistakes in designing and organizing these programs.

We have seen an enormous amount of resources going down the drain in team building programs due to some fundamental mistakes. There is nothing wrong with team building programs if the following elements are taken in to consideration.

1. Disinterest on part of Senior Management/Leadership:

We never allow a senior manager or a leader in a team building program to stay aloof from the entire activity. The easiest way to damage the initiative is bringing the CEO or formal leader of the team in the session as a spectator. We totally discourage observers. It is unfortunate that management sometimes enters into a team- building venture in a somewhat detached way. The detached manager looks at team development as something *not for him*. He thinks that this will help others change, but he doesn't need it.

After having done so many team building programs, I have reached the conclusion that often the most influential person in the majority of teams is the formal leader or manager. Like it or not, you set the tone for the team, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

It is obvious that team effectiveness cannot be improved unless the manager is willing to look at his/her contributions to the team. Management usually has to change too.

During a recent team building program, we came across the CEO of a company, who indeed was a real role model throughout the program. He responded by saying *"If you aren't willing to hear from employees how your behavior impacts the team (negatively or positively), don't do team- building. The worst thing you can do is start the process and refuse to acknowledge that you are a key player in the process."* He was surly a positive source of energy and motivation for the rest of the team.

2. No need analysis prior to the program

Two teams can never be the same. That's why each team building program has to be different. I have not seen any teams in my programs who were *exactly* the same. Teams are never similar. Each team is different with distinct strengths and weaknesses. Therefore the team building activity must build on these specific strengths and address weaknesses. Without knowing these strengths and weaknesses, the team building leader runs the risk of using a process that will be irrelevant or useless, resulting in lack of credibility for the process, and for the initiator which is most probably you.

Need analysis should precede any team building initiative. It is the first step in the process. If you are hiring an outside consultant, insist that they do a thorough team assessment as the first step. Without analysis, you will end up going nowhere. We have a three stage customization process, first stage of which ensures complete assessment of team effectiveness.

3. No team building model

People who lead a team-building process normally focus on a single aspect of team functioning. Can they afford to completely ignore many other elements that are critical to team success and effectiveness? Probably not. Team building is just not that simple. We all know that like a chain team is only as strong as its weakest component.

It is rare that a team will benefit by focusing on only one aspect of team development when they need to go through the *full range* of team development. In fact, what may happen is that the one-dimensional team building process may increase frustration, and destroy the credibility of the process.

Lest we forget the multi dimensional nature of team building dynamics, we must not forget the importance of a model of how teams function? This also helps us focus on the areas causing a decline in team's effectiveness.

It is enormously important to know what does an effective team require? We must ensure whether goals and mission are clearly stated and commonly understood; talent and skills required to meet goals properly identified; understanding of procedures, norms and interpersonal decorum is fully accepted. It is equally important that a system of reinforcement and celebration with a clear perception of teams' contribution to organizational ethos of the company.

4. Focus on short term intervention:

Another reason of failure is lack of longer term strategy for team development. Managers often arrange for a retreat or team-building day, not exactly knowing the long range future for the team. That is the reason why a one day filled with fun results in a brief motivational pour that rapidly dims.

Many a times teams will highlight issues that cannot be solved during that day. The result yet again is more frustration and lack of trustworthiness. Plan a long term strategy for team building. We suggest planning for at least one full year.

5. Missing team evaluation:

After the program, we usually start assuming that things are improving without putting in place a mechanism for regular evaluation of team functioning. If you believe that team building is a long-term process, then you (and team members) need to know whether it is succeeding or not.

You need to understand that the team improvement process is rarely smooth. There are always glitches, but the team building leader must be able to identify barriers so that the team can work to eliminate them. It is strongly recommended that you plan regular evaluation of team progress.

6. Doing it all internally:

Team building generally will not succeed unless conflicts and problems can be brought into the open and dealt with properly. A climate of blame, defensiveness, and lack of capability to deal with conflict does not allow teams to give and receive constructive feedback in a safe environment.

There are times when an outside consultant may be required. While a consultant may bring specialized skills that are lacking in the organization, the most important reason for using an outside consultant is that the "outsider" has no history with the organization, no preconceptions, and may have more credibility than someone who is perceived as having his/her own agenda.

Deciding to hire an outside consultant to help can really help. However, the team should not become too much dependent on the consultant. Eventually, the team has to develop the ability to improve on its own.

The minimum expectation I would have out of you after reading this article is that you stay away from these mistakes while deciding to lead any team building activities, or hiring someone for facilitating team building.

Lousy team building is worse than doing nothing. Improperly thought out efforts are likely to increase negativity, reduce team functioning, and trim down management credibility. Your own personal credibility as a manager depends a lot on your making effective team building decisions from day one. This will also impact the degree to which your employees have confidence in you.

Carefully designed team building program will surely enhance your positive image and reputation. At the end of a team building program, I saw the HR Head of a company with tears

in eyes saying, "I am crying because for the first time in my *career* somebody has appreciated the efforts made by HR department".

Well thought out team building program can help earn you more respect, credibility and reputation in the company. Plan team building programs well. Carefully design teaming initiative. Your endeavor to bring out the best in team will produce desired rewards for you and the team.

Qaiser Abbas is a team-building trainer, author and motivational speaker. He is the Founder & Chief Inspiring Officer, Possibilities®, a leading management training and consulting company, operating globally.