

## How to build teams that really deliver



Most people work in teams so at some point you will probably think about how to improve the performance of the team above and beyond individual performance.

Fun as they are, we urge you to think beyond teambuilding events such as go-karting, JCB driving or "doing a Ray Mears".

You'll find this article useful if you recognise that you have teams that do not perform as well as you would expect and you want to do something about it.

### Teambuilding - useful or not?

From our experience (and yours I bet) "teambuilding" events are not really worth the money. There are limited benefits:

- they get people out of the office
- they maybe allow people to get to know each other better
- they build camaraderie as they are usually fun events
- they build relationships
- and they provide a shared experience that the team can share later on

On reflection they actually sound quite beneficial! The problem is that unless everyone in the team is an adrenaline junky not everyone enjoys it, it can appear artificial, it can feel as though it is something "done to" the team, but above all the learning doesn't apply back at work. So, whilst there may be some benefits we would argue that they are largely superficial and not long lasting. If you went to your MD and asked to invest in something that appeared to have some short term benefits, but no long lasting impact on the business, what reply would you expect?!

### OK, so what's the answer?

There has been lots of work done around what distinguishes high performing teams from a group of people who just work together. The first thing to appreciate is that it takes time to develop a true team. As such we prefer the phrase team development to teambuilding. It recognizes that there is no quick fix and that it takes time and commitment to build a winning team.

Once we appreciate this effective teams need the following (in our view)

1. **Leadership** - whether you like it or not every team needs an effective leader. Teambuilding is not an effective substitute for not leading or managing people effectively. Effective leaders will bring to the team:
  - a) *Clarity* - each member of the team needs to be clear on the purpose of the team, the direction it is heading in and why, their role in it and other peoples' roles and how what needs to get done is going to get done. This can be worked on with the team and is often a good starting point.

- b) *Focus* - the team needs a unifying goal or purpose and each team member needs to know what their role in achieving that is. Again the team can work on this together
2. **Rules of engagement** - effective teams spend time defining how they are going to work together in order to be most productive. Think of a team of firefighters – you would hope they would have thought through how to operate in an emergency before they arrive at your house! Such rules might include:
- a) *how to deal with conflict* - conflict is normal. It can appear to be based on personal relationships, but usually occurs as people do not know how to express differing views on how to approach something or they do not have clarity on what the team's goals are. It is important to distinguish between conflict around the individual and conflict around the task. Good teams have established rules on how to deal with conflict and use it productively to focus on finding the best solution together. Successful conflict resolution occurs where everyone moves their perception from “me against you” to “us against the problem”. A useful phrase is “it’s not wrong, just different”.
  - b) *how to make decisions* - how many teams have you been in where the only decision in a meeting is to have another meeting?! Effective teams are not afraid to make decisions and stand by them. They do this by having established rules on how to make decisions. These involve exploring all the options, sharing information within the team fully (not holding it back to preserve personal power), considering all ideas, exploring feelings as well as fact and not being afraid to make mistakes.
  - c) *how to generate ideas* - when faced with tough challenges, a lot of teams come unstuck as no-one knows what to do. Creating an environment where ideas can flourish needs to be discussed and agreed. Some people will be naturally good at generating ideas, but they may not be the loudest voices in the group. Also many ideas can quickly be rubbished with the effect that it desuades people from putting forward ideas. Effective teams think about how to encourage and discuss ideas effectively with a view to selecting the best one.
3. **Goals and measures** - if teamworking is to have a benefit for the business then teams needs to deliver tangible results. Effective teams know what success looks like in terms of results and how they work together, they track their progress and alter course if necessary. Effective teams also celebrate milestones and achievements together – we don’t need to be all American about it, but everyone feels good driving home if they can see how their efforts are making a difference.
4. **Team spirit and morale** - everyone likes to feel part of something. Success will breed success and people put more effort into an endeavour that they feel part of. Teambuilding events have some value in generating team spirit and morale. However, as we have already argued, the impact can be short lived, usually where there are frustrations in the team caused by some of the issues we have just covered. If the team has clarity on what its purpose is, what it needs to achieve and how it is doing, good leadership and rules of engagement that have been agreed to then success and good team spirit will follow.

## What can we conclude?

Team spirit and morale will not guarantee success on their own. There are some significant foundations that need to be in place first. The problem is that, as with any solid structure, the foundations tend not to be visible and involve a lot of hard work. However, once they are in place success will follow and team spirit and morale will reinforce further success.

This is why teambuilding events that focus only on building team spirit have limited value.