



What is a Teambuilding Program?

By David Blum

Explaining what their son does has never been an easy task for my parents. “Oh, there’s Mrs. Weinstein—her son’s a doctor. And Mrs. Honeywell—her daughter’s an attorney. Our son?—oh, uh, yes, he’s a teambuilding trainer. No, no, I don’t know exactly what he does either, but he’s quite good at it, I can assure you.”

Figuring to bail them out before their next awkward cocktail party, I embarked this morning on an online “treasure hunt” for a working definition of “teambuilding program.” My initial Google search (keyword: “*teambuilding*”) delivered me a mere **112,000 entries!** Gracious Me--could there really be over 100,000 different business entities out there offering their own spin on teambuilding?!! Apparently. But surely there couldn’t be that many different types of teambuilding! Ah, now there’s the rub. As I began scrolling through the entries, I noticed that the various teambuilding organizations, in all their multitude, could be categorized into a few simple groupings.

The first differentiation I noticed was between **Training Seminars** and **Social Activities**. Beneath the wide “teambuilding” umbrella were these two very different entities: Education-based Training Workshops and High-Energy Social Events. On the one hand you had companies offering seminars with a “learning-focus,” where you could expect to strategize, “think out of the box,” prioritize, confront, collaborate, adapt to change and communicate. On the other hand, you had outfits lauding their “teambuilding parties,” with the emphasis squarely on “morale boosting”. In the prior category, there was tremendous diversity—anything from Powerpoint presentations to team cooking to team sailing to team improv comedy to yes, team treasure hunts—but all with the focus on learning, whether it was for school groups or business work teams. In the latter category—which included photo scavenger hunts, bowling, billiards, paintball, and laser tag—the point seemed to be less about the educational content than about the “bonding” that occurs during a shared, informal, party-like experience. In short, the Training Seminar had facilitated learning discussions, the Social Activity didn’t. But they were both billed as “teambuilding”!

The second differentiation I noticed was between **Adventure Programs** and, well, **Everything Else**. Some examples of “Adventure” programs are Ropes Courses, Outward Bound-type survival tests, River Rafting, Rock Climbing, Sailing, and the like.

All these different outfits seemed to be offering people a chance to build trust and cooperation while confronting some fairly rigorous physical challenges, always in the great outdoors, usually with some kind of elaborate “apparatus” (ropes, pulleys, cables, crampons, etc.). “Everything Else” included all the huge variety of teambuilding options that could be done indoors, without mussing your hair. And in a gray area were events like treasure hunts and scavenger hunts, outdoor programs with a generally “lower-impact,” involving mostly walking & thinking (rather than jumping, climbing or swimming.) Whether any of these programs, “adventure” or not, were “educational” in nature varied from outfit to outfit.

So what, then, is a teambuilding program? It seems to be whatever you define it. Indoors. Outdoors. Adventure. Non-Adventure. Educational Seminar. Morale-boosting Party. It all depends on what you want to accomplish, and the demographic of your group. Certainly there is no end of options, or of companies wanting your “teambuilding dollar.”

My own opinion: I believe teambuilding programs stand apart from “social events” in their emphasis on learning and practicing new skills. They should always be facilitated, with experienced trainers leading the “midbriefs” and “final debriefs”. And they should provide a philosophical element as well—leaving participants with a bigger picture of teams and human cooperation than they had at the beginning. In other words, people should be a little bit “blown away” at the end, their minds opened to a larger world. For example, in my Dr. Clue Treasure Hunts, we try to use our core simulation (the treasure hunt) as a laboratory for looking at work team dynamics. Practical questions we might discuss include: “How do teams get mobilized?” “How much planning is appropriate?” “What are the implications of team members wandering off on their own agenda?” “When is it best to ‘cut bait’ and give up on a clue?” And “Which communication tools allow you to best access your team’s individual group knowledge?” Philosophical questions might include: “Why are we so naturally competitive and where does that come from?” And “Are there alternatives to a ‘warlike’ corporate attitude?”

In other words, teambuilding programs, unlike “morale-boosting” events, should be thoughtful, useful, and potentially transformative in nature.

In my humble opinion.

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