



## **Why Teambuilding? Why Now?**

**By David Blum**

Earlier this year, I was in Denver preparing for a treasure hunt. The night before the program, the client asked me to join the group for a drink at the hotel where we were staying. Expecting fifteen people when I arrived in the hotel lounge, I was surprised to see that only fourteen team members were present. Who was missing? "Oh, that's just Mark being Mark," explained my client contact, Anthony. "He doesn't believe in business-related socializing during his 'private time.'"

The next day in our conference room, I finally met Mark, a tall, stern-looking man in his 50s, with arms perpetually folded across his chest and a perma-scowl fixed upon his face. Warily I approached him and asked, "So, Mark, why didn't we see you at the social last night?" Expressionless, he grumbled, "The way I see it, I have a business life and a private life and I see no reason to mix the two. I come to work, do my job the best I can, and punch the clock. Why do I have to socialize with the people I work with?"

"And your feelings about today's teambuilding program?"

"Just more useless social nonsense."

Harumph. I could see Mark and I were going to have quite an "adventure" together that day. But more on that later...

I share this story because it raises some fairly significant philosophical questions about people and work, namely:

- Is teambuilding necessary?
- Do we really need to have a "relationship" with our co-workers?

As a teambuilding trainer my gut response, of course, is "Yes! Relationships are what business is all about!" But perhaps it's worth slowing down and examining the matter a bit more closely.

The argument against relationship-building at works starts with this oft-heard declaration: "I work to live, I don't live to work." Put differently, this expression avers that one's work life and one's private life are two distinct aspects of the self, with

private life possessing quite a bit more value than its counterpart. Work, from this viewpoint, is what you tolerate in order to support the “real” life that exists in your “free” time. Now I agree that people should maintain a healthy balance between work and relaxation, that they should not get so obsessed with work that they neglect friends, family and recreation. What I wonder about is the notion that either of the two “lives” has more value than the other. Private time is indeed important—and so is work time ...but does one *have to have* more value than the other? Can they not be relatively equal in value? Is it simply a pipe dream to love both your work life and your private life in equal measure? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. My point is that the two aspects of self are not *inherently* as far apart as they seem. Value is always subjective.

Implicit, as well, in the expression “I work to live, I don’t live to work” is the idea that one’s behavior should be different in work and at play. According to the Marks of the world, your private time is when you’re allowed to be yourself: warm, playful, vulnerable, and social. When you’re at work on the other hand, you should be *business-like*: serious, responsible, efficient and self-contained. The fact that maintaining this kind of Jeckyl & Hyde personality-split puts tremendous (and often unacknowledged) stress on people would be lost on Mark and his ilk. They see business as an intricate *machine*; management assembles all the necessary parts (people), puts them together, adds oil, fuel, and maintenance, and the mechanism moves ahead, generating profits. Relationship-building is merely a wrench in the works...a wasteful machine slow-down.

Alas, both the mechanistic-business model and the business-time/private-time dualism fail to take into account this essential reality about human beings: We are driven by relationships, both privately and professionally. What’s more, business success is driven by relationships as well!

**Skeptical? Well, let’s walk through this notion together: Just what is the goal of relationship?** Business relationships and personal relationships have much the same aims—namely, to move ahead together towards a *common goal*. Say, for example, two people meet, fall in love, and decide to plan a life together. The long-term success of their union will rely greatly on their ability to align their hopes, dreams and aspirations. So how do they “get on the same page”? They talk things out! They discuss, debate, argue and negotiate—without holding back or “stuffing” their feelings, which only creates resentment later on. For the sake of reaching and maintaining a common vision of the future, they do whatever it takes to create an open, honest environment for debate and discussion. Only when people are heard, when they hash things out passionately, will they really have a shot at buying into a shared, common vision. And this must happen again and again and again, throughout the course of their relationship.

**The same, I think, is true for business. Getting people to commit to common goals is the competitive advantage for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.** With everyone in the same economic boat, those companies that can create and nurture an environment in which people are all rowing in the same direction will be the ones who outstrip their less-directed competition!

So how does a business go about getting its employees to commit to a common vision? Because in an organization, we're no longer talking about the relationship between just two people. We're talking about a marriage of twenty people, of 200, of 2000!

Just as in a romantic relationship, the key in business is to establish an environment of open dialogue and discourse, where people can disagree about, debate, and discuss the direction of their work—openly, without filtering or holding back. Then, when the debate is over, they need to be able to walk away without collateral damage or unexpressed grievances. The fact that they've had an equal chance to be heard is usually enough.

Establishing such an environment is no easy task. Everyone needs to have trust...trust that people will play by the rules and keep discussion focused on ideas rather than personality...trust that expressing themselves will not endanger relationships...trust that people will walk away without harboring ill will and grudges.

And this is where teambuilding really earns its stripes: A well-conceived and executed teambuilding program can jumpstart the process of trust formation. It can break down the barriers that force people to maintain their protective "work life" shells. It can encourage people to have empathy with their fellow co-workers. And it can provide structures and processes that better maintain an atmosphere of safety which is so necessary for the type of open dialogue and passionate discussion I've been talking about.

To summarize:

- Trust leads to a feeling of safety.
- Safety allows people to risk making themselves vulnerable by disagreeing with others.
- Healthy, constructive, idea-oriented disagreement, debate and discussion allow everyone to be heard.
- When everyone has said his or her piece, commitment to a common goal emerges.
- Commitment to a common vision is vital for higher organizational productivity!

Now back to Mark in Denver:

"So Mark, have you ever been a part of a work team where you enjoyed being together, felt some synchronicity, had fun and achieved great things together?"

"Yeah, once. In fact, when I worked as a bellhop right here in this hotel."

"Really? And did you enjoy that experience, that sense of being in the flow with your co-workers?"

"I sure did."

"So wouldn't you want to have that experience again?"

"Well, at this company, the management commands everything from the top. We don't have any say in the decision-making. Our opinions don't matter! So why should I put in the effort to spend time with and build relationships with my co-workers?"

"So you're saying that management has a responsibility for setting the tone and nurturing a participative environment."

"You got it."

As it turned out, Mark's disillusionment that day was fairly intractable. Following along behind his treasure hunt team with little or no involvement, Mark created neither positive nor negative ripples, remaining essentially *detached*. Here was a person operating without a relationship to his workmates – contributing little and receiving little in return. His lack of energy definitely disturbed his team and inhibited its performance. And needless to say, they lost the activity.

Would an active, engaged Mark—putting in his two cents, participating in the decisions - have brought victory to his team? Maybe yes, maybe no. But they certainly would have had more passion and more direction. And probably a bit more fun, too.

**To Do and Notice:**

**In an effort to avoid the "Mark Syndrome," take a look at your work environment and ask yourself the following questions:**

- 1) Is everyone around me clear and committed to our departmental and company goals?**
- 2) Do we even have clearly-stated goals?**
- 3) Would I be willing to argue openly with my co-workers about the direction the department is moving? Would anybody else?**

If the answer to these questions is NO then you've got yourself an office lacking in trust and direction.

Although management has a role to play in creating open and trusting relationship, it's also up to you to make your work, like your personal life, a more functional, relationship-oriented place. Push to get people talking and expressing their opinions in meetings. Advocate for frequent social and relationship-building activities (including offsite teambuilding). Show a little of yourself at work and be willing to let down your cloaks of invulnerability. The effort will be worth it—personally and professionally.

[For further discussion of this topic, read Patrick Lencioni's The Five Dysfunctions of a TEAM, Jossey-Bass, 2002]

Dave Blum  
Dr. Clue Treasure Hunts

www.drclue.com  
drclue@drclue.com  
415.566.3905