



Your Team-Building Exercises May Not Be Creating a Team

Team leaders have a perennial dilemma: How can they educate, engage, and develop their group in a substantial way that helps the team become better?

Team-building is often seen as the fun add-on to a meeting devoted to science, sales figures, and quarterly goals. Activities are varied: ropes courses, golf, trips to the desert, horseback riding, softball, cooking school, and many others. Were these experiences useful toward the goal? If the goal is a fun distraction or an open afternoon, then these experiences create shared memories and are often a welcome opportunity. But the goal is rarely just to have a fun afternoon. Leaders want teams to trust better, to understand at a deeper level, and certainly to communicate with one another in useful ways beyond one afternoon.

Building a team requires three basic elements, and they are the same perpetual needs that all team leaders have: engagement, education, and development — all with a twist.

Engagement with a twist

Sometimes it's simple — like a handshake — and other times it's complex — like securing buy-in for a high-dollar project. But engagement always involves obtaining a “yes” from the other person. This agreement begins a cooperative relationship that seeks to align goals, minimize a judgmental response, and keep the momentum going, even during the naturally tough times that are bound to come.

The commitment of marriage, for example, is usually symbolized by an engagement ring; while in business, commitment is demonstrated with a signed letter or contract. In both instances, engagement is an agreement that both parties will move forward and seek more specific agreements. When people are engaged in both the marital and business context, a feeling of security assures each person that they will work together.

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This agreement cannot be secured in one event. Just as hospitals have a heart monitor on every patient, team leaders must constantly monitor the telltale signs of stress, unrest, and frustration. This involves listening to what the team says and what they don't say, and maybe what they cannot say.

Here is the twist: Listening closely to both the words and the feelings of your team members allows you as the leader and those who work for you to feel your engagement. Paraphrasing and empathy are the perennial, highly reliable skills that will help you steer clear of becoming judgmental. When you are in tune with your team members' unique “heart-beats” of engagement, you will know when somebody becomes an outlier. Only then can you use your other skills to bring them back aboard.

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Education with a twist

Too many meetings are based on lectures, a repetitive structure that might have worked for multiplication tables in primary school. When teaching adults, presenters actually waste valuable education time thinking that dumping data, spreadsheets, bullet points, and manuals onto people will somehow enlighten them.

The word “education” comes from the Latin word “educare”, which means “to lead out” or “draw forth from”. Socrates knew this when he asked questions to “draw forth from” his students. While this might make sense on paper, it is a more significant shift in how we can really envision meetings. We still usually run our meetings with a speaker or presenter who often says, “Is it okay if I take questions later?” These people will then read their PowerPoint aloud, droning on and on, while the audience reads each slide and then waits for the presenter to finish.

Instead of a 60–90-minute lecture, consider these formats.

- The presenter doesn’t see this as “my time”, but sees “our time” as an opportunity for the team to talk with one another about the essence of the issues
- The team divides into groups of three, brainstorms three or four concerns for the future, and then has the expert facilitator give a 10–12-minute reflection on each of the concerns
- The meeting is simply a Q&A session
- The expert asks the audience questions, guiding the team toward answering the question “What do we need to do to prepare for the future we want to make?”

Here is the twist: When we forget that education is really about drawing forth from our collective experience, we waste

incredible resources present in our teams. Witnessing this collective knowledge is a strong formative element for a team. This is often what scientists experience working on a project in a “think tank” session, or what a Broadway cast feels on opening night.

Development with a twist

This is the most important — yet most often ignored — element when building a team. In an effort to move forward quickly, many leaders start sharing the “take-aways” from the experience before the team has caught their breath. When team leaders say, “I hope that you realized this horseback riding taught us to better listen to one another just as we did with our horses”, they risk the team saying, “What? I thought we just learned there’s some beautiful scenery here!” Instead, team leaders should consider asking:

- What did you notice when you tried to steer your horse too hard?
- What did you learn about your colleagues’ lives during the ride?
- For those who have never been horseback riding, what skills did you learn?
- Aren’t those skills some of the same that we need in our office?

Here is the twist: Just as we rely on crockpots to slowly heat and meld a meal’s flavours together, we must allow the individuals to apply the lessons for themselves.

Team-building with a twist

So, it is okay to take the team golfing, horseback riding, or out for drinks, but don’t think that activity alone will build the team any more than a reception with fine wine and tasty cheese will foster interesting conversation at dinner.

Reconsider how you educate and how you think about education, because everyone will learn more when the collective team experience is drawn forth. Finally, understand that the act of looking back on what the team learned and experienced together is a vital part of becoming a team and building one.

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