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Teambuilding: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why

Houston, Texas, November 4, 2008. To Customize or Not to Customize?

Most teambuilding activities are based on a psychological principle of projection, i.e., that people project their inner beliefs outward onto the world around them. The idea in training programs is that when placed in a simulated experience, such as a teambuilding activity, most people respond in ways that provide insights into how they respond in real situations. A related assumption is that the insights gained from a simulated experience will transfer or change behavior in the real situation. These assumptions are not always true. What is often more true is:

1. People will not behave the same way in teambuilding games as they will at work.
2. People will not be able to transfer insights they gain from teambuilding game experience into work experience.

Unfortunately, most teambuilding experiences ignore these problems. Games are designed to entertain, or management decides unilaterally what issues should be addressed in order to get the team on track. Fortunately, there are ways to customize simulated experiences so that they accurately reflect real situations, or turn the teambuilding into actual work sessions and thus decrease resistance and increase motivation to participate on the part of employees. There are five principles, four processes and four elements to a successful teambuilding event.

<u>Five Basic Team Building Principles</u>

Principle 1

People are more willing to participate in a teambuilding event they see as designed in response to their expressed concerns (as opposed to management's perceptions of what employees need). See <u>"Concerns Based Adoption Model".</u>

Principle 2

Most conflicts are resolvable because they are the result of misunderstandings.

Principle 3

What happens back at work as a result of the teambuilding is more important than what happens during the teambuilding session itself.

Principle 4

Functional teams talk about their dysfunctions. Dysfunctional teams do not.

An important goal of a successful teambuilding program is for participants to increase their skill, talent and comfort in having ongoing discussions about how their team is functioning, and how they are "*dysfunctioning*."

Principle 5

Most people need to have their own concerns understood first, before they are able to understand the concerns of another.

<u>Four Basic Team Building Processes</u>

The success of any team building event depends on four primary processes.

1. **Preparation of Facilitator and Participants:** Through interviews with key players and surveys of all team members, the facilitator must identify the formal and informal leaders and those who are most resistant to the teambuilding process, along with major employee concerns (hot buttons) and conflicts (land

mines). When participants perceive their concerns and conflicts being identified in preparation for a teambuilding program, they reduce resistance to participate and increase motivation to address concerns and conflicts. Potential "land mines" should be identified through this diagnostic preparation process in order to facilitate "setting them off" in a structured and supportive manner that allows for resolution of the conflict. Most people are apprehensive about taking this risk, but success is likely since the majority of conflicts are a result of misunderstandings.

2. **Trust in Facilitator:** Team members must trust the ability of the facilitator(s) to make sure employee needs and concerns will be fairly represented. People are naturally motivated to deal with issues when they believe there is a reasonable chance of being successful. This hopefulness of success begins in the preparation process when trust is built between participants and facilitator.

3. **Facilitator skill:** The facilitator must be skilled in reading what is going on "in between the lines" of what people say, in dealing not just with what people say but with what they *are not* saying(!), and guiding participants to bring their concerns out in the open where issues can be more clearly addressed. The facilitator must create a sensitive balance between clarifying, supporting, challenging, and stepping out of the way to let the group's momentum take over. Being structured in having a plan and also flexible in being able to adjust to unforeseen occurrences is an important balance for a facilitator to maintain.

4. **Follow-up:** Team building activity discussions should conclude with decisions of specific actions that will be taken to put any changes into practice, how progress will be measured, and assignments and dates to review this progress.

Four Key Elements to designing a successful teambuilding event

1. **Employee Concerns Understood:** Team members will be more motivated to be actively involved in a teambuilding event when they believe their concerns are sincerely understood by their leaders. Successful teambuilding leaders facilitate processes in which the team members actually *feel understood*.

2. **Engaging Activities:** Even if employees do not begin with a belief that the experience will really change things at work, they need to be actively involved in the teambuilding activities. When activities are designed to clearly reflect their concerns, participants are much more intrinsically motivated to participate.

3. **Customized Activities:** Activities for the sake of activity or purely for fun can be a waste of time. Icebreakers and activities must be customized to reflect the current circumstances of the team in order to produce significant insights and results in behavior.

4. **Employees Willing To Risk:** Any time one moves from what's familiar to what's new there is an emotional barrier of uncomfortable feelings. The facilitator must encourage people to move through the discomfort by giving them opportunities to take reasonable risks to openly discuss the team's methods of functioning.

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