

What Types of Teambuilding Will Work for Your Teams?

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Team members who work well together create positive results and enjoy themselves while working.

Unfortunately, not all teams work well together – a fact that has sparked intense interest in techniques for improving teamwork effectiveness.

Teambuilding refers to activities that improve the effectiveness of a team by building better working relationships, better understanding and alignment among members, and improved communications and trust. This article outlines the four most often employed methods of teambuilding and makes suggestions about when each method might be appropriate for a particular team that is having difficulties.

The four different approaches to improving the level of teamwork in an institution are:

1. Personality-Based Teambuilding
2. Activity-Based Teambuilding
3. Skills-Based Teambuilding
4. Problem solving-Based Teambuilding

Personality-Based Teambuilding

In personality-based teambuilding, members of the team fill out a personality questionnaire, where they not only learn about their own personalities, but also learn about the personalities of their fellow team members. The team then uses the results as a basis for discussion, developing action steps, and participating in various development experiences.

The underlying rationale for this approach is that if team members better understand each other (such as differences in how team members perceive, make decisions, and react to events), they can then learn how to better communicate and deal with each other, thus enhancing team effectiveness.

Activity-Based Teambuilding

In activity-based teambuilding, teams carry out challenging tasks, usually in outdoor settings (e.g., an experiential “ropes” course, or an outdoor adventure, such as white water rafting, mountain climbing, a survival course, or boot camp). These activities require groups to work together to achieve success. The exercises are built around specific needs of teams and include group problem solving, risk-taking, trust, and paradigm breaking.



The underlying philosophy of this approach is that if team members experience success while working together in a challenging outdoor experience, they will then be able to transfer these teamwork lessons to the work setting and become a more effective team.

Skills-Based Teambuilding

In skills-based teambuilding, team members participate in workshop sessions that require them to learn and practice specific teamwork skills (e.g., dealing with conflict, reaching group consensus, learning how to give criticism, or running effective team meetings). These workshops include skills that can be applied immediately in the workplace.

The teambuilding aspect of this approach is maximized when intact teams participate together and make commitments to use these new tools to improve the way the team functions. The underlying philosophy with the skill-building approach is that the most likely reason groups do not work together well as a team is because they do not have the necessary skills. Thus, the obvious first step in building better teams is to have teams practice using teamwork skills in facilitated workshop settings, increasing the likelihood they will use these skills in the work setting.

Problem Solving-Based Teambuilding

In problem solving-based teambuilding, team members jointly work together (usually in a retreat setting and led by an outside facilitator) to identify and then solve the barriers to effectiveness the group is experiencing. The underlying rationale with this approach is that camaraderie and teamwork can occur if the outside facilitator helps the group successfully surface and then address (rather than avoid) the various barriers to team effectiveness.

Do These Interventions Help Teams Work Better?

Not always. However, under the right circumstances, groups improve their teamwork and effectiveness through the use of these interventions. The following examples illustrate how each one of these approaches can positively impact teams.

Case 1. Personality Testing

An information technology team from a large university was given the task of implementing a university-wide wireless network. Although this team was composed of very bright employees, their progress was slow and their meetings got off-track and were rarely productive. Our observation of their group processes over time revealed that a good deal of the wasted time in team meetings resulted from personality differences between the appointed leader of the team and a very influential member of the team who, in fact, was the “informal” leader of the team.

Each team member completed a personality inventory and then participated in various group exercises to learn about personality differences on the team. In addition, a trained facilitator met separately with the two key individuals creating the tension on the team. The personality test results showed that these two team members were opposite in orientation on several important dimensions. The behavioral consequences of these differences were misunderstanding and antagonism toward each other. Once this was understood, the two agreed on ground rules to help understand each other and to react positively to each other in meetings. With this barrier removed, the team experienced less conflict, meetings were more productive, and the team eventually developed a high level of cohesion.

Case 2. A Ropes Course

A college leadership team was having trouble setting direction and understanding their roles on the leadership team. Despite several team meetings, the team did not have a clear direction and could not reach agreement about how to implement and achieve their performance targets.

As part of a planning retreat, the team participated in an outdoor “low ropes” course in which the team members went through several experiential group problem-solving events. The final event involved climbing over a ten-foot wall. The group had to find a way to get every team member over the wall.

In a debriefing session the next morning, a member of the team compared the roles each played in the wall-climbing event to the roles they would have to play to accomplish their targets. The team member also mentioned the enthusiasm and camaraderie with which they used when faced with the outdoor obstacle, and then challenged the team to use the same energy and enthusiasm to meet their targets. This discussion spawned new energy on the team and facilitated a breakthrough in their understanding of how a true team works together to accomplish challenging goals. In subsequent meetings during a six-month period, the team continued to relate ongoing business challenges to the lessons they had learned in helping each other during the ropes course experience. This was a successful example of how a team transferred lessons learned during an outdoor activity to help solve teamwork issues at work.

Case 3. Skills-Based Teambuilding

Several years ago, a private university information technology department embarked on implementing teams. Although some of these teams flourished, several were not productive and had trouble operating under the new team environment. A diagnosis revealed that some teams were having trouble reaching consensus and dealing with other members on the teams.

The best teambuilding approach for this situation involved the skills-based approach. Team members participated in several workshops to teach them how to make decisions by consensus, how to deal with team conflict, how to analyze problems as a group, and how to give and receive feedback with others. The sessions included the use of actual teamwork situations and challenges as learning opportunities. The team members received assignments so that between sessions the participants had to approach each other, give feedback, and deal with conflict using the skills they were taught in training.



Learning and practicing tools for handling teamwork issues changed the performance levels of these teams. In fact, team members often consulted their teambuilding manuals daily. Many of the teams went from dysfunctional to functional almost overnight. The training sessions themselves brought people closer together, facilitated frank discussions of current problems, and allowed participants to role-play better ways of handling those situations. By dealing with these issues in the training sessions with a facilitator, team members quickly built mutual support and camaraderie that would not have happened any other way.

Case 4. A Problem-Solving Intervention

The cross-functional project team of a multi-year, multi-million dollar enterprise software implementation was behind schedule, not working well together, and experiencing poor morale. During a two-day retreat, the group combined facilitated problem-solving sessions during the day and social events at night. Both the problem-solving exercises and the social events were designed to build camaraderie and a spirit of working together.

The problem-solving sessions produced a brainstormed list of the team's barriers to success. The team prioritized this list, and then assigned the top priority items to sub-groups for analysis. These sub-groups followed a logical problem-solving process (i.e., list symptoms, list possible causes, identify the root cause(s), develop actions to remove the cause), and then presented their suggestions to the team as a whole.

This intervention was extremely beneficial for the team for several reasons. First, it allowed the group to vent their problems and frustrations. Once vented publicly, the group was psychologically more willing to move toward the solutions. Second, cohesiveness was built as the group worked together to attack their problems during the intensive two-day period. Third, the group saw that they did have some control over their destiny and saw the "light at the end of the tunnel," motivating them further. Fourth, the exercise resulted in a prescription for action, which served as a great antidote to the frustration and inaction they had been experiencing.

As an added benefit, the group began to know each other better and to like each other. In "lessons learned" discussions after the project was completed two-and-a-half years later, many team members pointed to this two-day event as

a significant stimulus in moving the project forward.

Which Approach is Best?

As you might expect, no simple answer to this question exists. The right teambuilding approach depends upon the team and the type of problems the team is experiencing. However, below are five general guidelines or "rules of thumb" regarding the use of teambuilding interventions.

- 1. Not all teams need teambuilding.** If a team is functioning well, an investment in teambuilding is not necessary. This fact may appear to be common sense, but many institutions put all their teams through the same teambuilding experiences, regardless of whether the individual teams had a need or not.
- 2. Not all team problems should be dealt with by a teambuilding intervention.** For example, problems caused by a poor team leader should be dealt with through private one-on-one coaching or by a management decision to replace the leader. Likewise, many teams have one person who was responsible for much of the dysfunction on the team. In these instances, this person should be handled by management through the usual performance management process, rather than by taking an entire team through a teambuilding experience.
- 3. Skills-based teambuilding is the first choice.** The preferred teambuilding method is the skills-based approach. Many dramatic improvements in team functioning have occurred by conducting training sessions with an intact team and then having the team use these skills with each other during the training sessions.

- 4. The teambuilding approach depends on the type of team.** “Temporary” teams (teams that are formed to work on a small project and then disband when the project is completed) and “permanent” teams (teams that stay intact over a long period of time) require different teambuilding approaches.

For “temporary” teams that are having difficulty working together, the problem solving-based teambuilding intervention is the first choice, because it is the most practical and simplest intervention for this type of team. Most temporary teams have members that are not dedicated to the team full-time. They have their regular jobs in the institution and they work on the team as an additional duty that may require working together for one or two days a month until the team project is finished. This type of team does not work together on a daily basis and, therefore, does not have to get along well with each other frequently. For this reason, interventions such as outdoor ropes courses, skill-based workshops, or personality testing are not worth the investment of time and resources. If the team is having trouble, a problem solving-based retreat usually works well.

When it comes to “permanent” teams (e.g., leadership teams, self-directed teams, etc.) that are having problems, one or more teambuilding approaches will work. As a “rule of thumb,” the skills-based approach to teambuilding works best since these team members must learn the skills to get along with each other on a daily basis over a long period of time. However, during the life cycle of a permanent team, the team members experience ups and downs in

their ability to work effectively together. Therefore, starting with the skills-based approach and then later (e.g., a year or more later) taking the team through an outdoor experience, a personality-based team building experience, or even a problem solving-based retreat works well. In particular, with mission-critical teams, such as a leadership team, a problem solving-based retreat every year or two, or an occasional outdoor adventure, can serve to recharge or reenergize even the best functioning teams.

- 5. The teambuilding approach depends on the type of teamwork problem the team is facing.** If the team problem is inertia (the team is “bogged down” and not getting anything accomplished), a problem solving-based retreat is preferred. If the problem is lack of trust, various outdoor activities have been highly effective in helping people understand and deal with trust. If the problem is the team cannot reach consensus and resolve conflicts, the skills-based approach provides the skills needed to resolve these problems. If members are talking behind each other’s back and not being open with one another, the skills-based approach or an outdoor exercise can help focus and help deal with these issues. If members are not getting along well with each other, the skills-based, personality-based, and outdoor activities, in that order of preference, provide the team with the support needed.

There is one final success ingredient that cuts across all four types of team interventions: a strong and committed leader. It is vital to team advancement to have a leader who clearly stands behind the intervention and communicates the expectation that teambuilding lessons must be applied and sustained

over time. A weak leader, more often than not, leads to poor long-term intervention results, where a strong leader increases the chance that the intervention will succeed.

Conclusion

Teams of people working together to create positive results have proven to be one of the best ways to run projects. The more successful the teams are at working together, the better the outcomes and the higher the satisfaction of the team members. When team members do not work together well, institutions can, unfortunately, experience the opposite effect: lack of consensus, wasted meetings and meeting time, mediocre or poor execution of work tasks, and low morale. The four types of teambuilding interventions presented here, when employed in the right way for the right type of team problem, can considerably improve team performance.

