

Why team building is a waste of your money

By Chris Atkinson

The training market has seen a steady, continued growth in the area of teambuilding. More and more companies are committing their three most precious assets to the type of events - *time, money and resources*. Why then, with so much at stake, are we wasting so much resource on ineffective team building days that serve no useful purpose to the long-term health of the organisation?

The annual team build has become a calendar event, which takes on many meanings. For the *holidaymakers* it promises the prospect of a day out of the office, fresh air, lunch and possibly even a decent evening meal plus generous drinks tab. To the *hostages* the fear being held against their will outdoors, tied up with ropes and facing feats of both physical and mental agility or endurance seems to contravene the Geneva Convention. The *saboteurs* in organisations will take the opportunity to show how pointless the activity is, how inaccurately it reflects the real world and more often than not how much more astute they would be had they been in charge.

Where then are our participants? Where are those who seek the opportunity to develop new skills and relationships; the people who see possibility and actively pursue new avenues to achieve those futures? My fear is these people have been lost into the other categories by a process of attrition through years of disconnected, irrelevant activities on 'team-building' events.



My belief, on the other hand, is that the industry needs to change in order to survive and become an intrinsic part into the annual budget of its customers. Having worked as a trainer with many of the leading organisations in the UK I have seen an ever increasing focus on the application and measurement of training effectiveness, and an increasing cut back of 'irrelevant' training activities that are not seen to be part of the overall strategy or effectiveness. With the training market saturated those of us that have built successful, thriving training organisations are those that have

connected their programmes with the real-world issues and held participants accountable for application.



The team building industry has grown rapidly, without ever really considering its role in business. Far from dismissing team building events as a waste of time and money I would suggest what most organisations think they are currently purchasing is *not* team building but rather incentive or reward days. Lets consider the possibility in terms of definition:

Reward/Incentive Days: Absolutely fun, lively days, enjoyable and varied in style and activity. They deliver increased morale, the *possibility* of better relationships (note that many 'team' days serve to reinforce divides and further ostracise people and teams) and, 'a nice day out'.

This is by no means to belittle the hugely important role this type of day can represent but rather to clarify what one can hope to be expected as a result. In truth I love these days and attend at least three or four a year with clients and typically, its great fun. Our challenge is really the expectation of the client. As a result of this day can we hope people will transfer the learning and insight into productive and profitable business activities? Team build companies proudly declare the participant feedback as evidence of success “great day”, “much better than I expected” and “found the day very useful” but, in reality, getting positive feedback really should be a case of minimum standard - compared to a day in the office it really isn’t a challenge.

Team Building Events: Aspirationally fun, lively days, enjoyable and varied in style and activity. They deliver learning and insights relevant to the real life business environment of participants. They create organisational context and link activities, task and games to the overall objective of the organisation.



They look pretty similar at the surface level, but fundamentally these are two very different events. A large majority of the team building businesses market to industry as the latter (team building) but in truth deliver the former (reward days) - this is evidenced by the lack of tangible change in behaviours once back in the workplace. Great team building days recognise the tasks, activities or games are **just analogies** and as such are simply a vehicle to create learning. On a reward day, who wins and loses will matter (as it should for competition and fun), on a team build however this is irrelevant against what is learnt as a result and how that relates to business. Once again: The day is just an analogy!

I consider myself a business person working in training rather than the other way round, as such I believe reward and incentive days will become an increasing financial luxury. The danger is that if team building becomes synonymous with what are actually little more than reward days, organisations will fail to see tangible benefits and simply dismiss them as a waste of time and money. The future of our market depends on clarity of expectations and our ability to deliver both what is expected and what is needed - with the strong focus being on result and business relevance.

About Chris:

Chris is a Director of Elysian Training Ltd and recently set up Elysian Team Building Events. He qualified for Dale Carnegie Training in 2001 as their youngest trainer in the organisation worldwide and now works nationally and internationally with the leadership of organisations to deliver training and team building events. His background is in psychology, counselling and business coaching.



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