



At the helm: Team sailing offers everyone the chance to skipper a boat and compete in a regatta. Such team-building activities can build morale and trust among co-workers.

Team-building programs build employee morale

By Leslie Williams Johnson

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It's not every day that colleagues have the chance to get more in synch with each other by beating on drums.

Nor is it often that a person's trust is put to the test by navigating an S-shaped gauntlet of his peers, who move their outstretched arms alternately up and down before the co-worker approaches.

For employees who have engaged in team-building activities, the experience and lessons stay with them long after the challenging, and often unusual, exercise is over — which is the whole point.

"People come away with a lot more knowledge about who their peers are and who they are," said Atlanta-based success coach Larry Lipman, (www.funteam-building.com), who conducts team-building activities and exercises. "The best part is...the walls come tumbling down."

From small groups of five to hundreds more, team-building activities can help inspire workers, build morale and trust, and encourage a fresh perspective on problem-solving.

Perhaps most importantly, team building also teaches employees to overcome obstacles and change.

An event such as team sailing addresses this issue, said Angie Feehan, marketing director at Adventure Associates based in California's Bay Area (www.adventureassoc.com). She said small groups of 30 and under do well with the activity, in which participants are each assigned different roles on a sailboat, then rotate those responsibilities. After some training, they participate in a regatta.

"Sailing is a good analogy" to the business world, Feehan said. "The winds are going to change and you can't change that, but you can adjust yourself and the sails."

Lipman said his mission is similar. "I teach people how to handle change — which is huge, because the only [person] who likes change is a wet baby."

One company takes a pounding approach to encourage team building — through drums.

"It's a morale booster. It creates an incredible sense of unity," said Jo-Ann Radus, director of The Drum Café in

Atlanta (www.drumcafeatlanta.com), which runs 30- to 80-minute programs. "When people do it, they talk about it forever."

The Drum Café, which has operated in South Africa for nine years and whose Atlanta office is one of several branches in the United States, provides an African drum to each participant, teaching everyone to listen to each other. Before long, everyone's making music. The company says its exercises can be applied to everything from team-building to creativity to promotional launches and holiday celebrations.

A client looking for a high-energy event as an opener or closer often will bring in the Drum Café, Radus said. Drumming also offers a certain release to participants.

"In the corporate environment, there's so much stress and pressure to get the job done," Radus said. "[The drum program] is an hour or 80 minutes where people get a complete break."

The president, two executive vice presidents and four vice presidents

of the Acworth-based Primrose School Franchising Co. spent a day and half with Adventure Associates doing a range of team-building exercises and physically challenging activities last spring.

There was some adjusting at first, said Bob Benowitz, executive vice president of operations, but once the members took a deep breath and approached the challenges more carefully together, "we accomplished them in a flash," he said.

Adventure Associates' activities include one in which teammates try guiding each other through an obstacle course using verbal commands, an exercise called "landmine." It also has ropes courses, found in many team-building activities.

The Institute of Nuclear Power Operations, or INPO, in Atlanta, has worked with Lipman since 1998. Lipman is brought in on the second day of a five-week leadership and management course, held four times a year, each time with 14 participants who come from companies around the nation and the world, said Bob McKendrick, senior program manager for INPO.

"Practically all the exercises are things they have to solve together," McKendrick said. "Some of them are pretty darn demanding."

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Larry Lipman
Success coach

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