

Building a Strong Team Key to Business Success

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



Tough economic times create work environments that can be tough on companies and their employees. Repeated layoffs have left fewer employees and managers in a number of work places throughout Kern County. Those who survive are expected to pick up the load for workers who have been laid off.

We are all being asked to make do with less – less revenue and less money to reinvest in our companies. At the same time we are expected to do more to be competitive and strong. The end result is we need to be as effective in working together as we possibly can.

American automotive pioneer Henry Ford is often quoted as saying, “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”

For a business to be a success, company owners and managers must invest in their people and energize them to work together more effectively -- no matter the state of the economy. Even when times are tough, there is the occasional need for a monetary investment to help motivate our people and build effective teams. The ability to function as a team does not come “naturally” to all people. That’s why training in this area is critical.

Team-building exercises build trust and rapport among team members. Exercises can range from learning about each others’ behavioral and communication styles, to a ropes course where members learn they can move more effectively if they move together. Even a fun outing, such as bowling, is a great team-building exercise!

Team-building training can be internal -- arranged by a company’s human resources department -- or external -- provided by outside HR consultants. In addition, the Internet is filled with suggestions for team building exercises. Success, however, depends on selecting and implementing the “right” exercise. Here are a few tips:

- Keep it short. Don’t waste employees’ already scarce time on prolonged, tedious “chores.” Exercises seen as time-wasting and patronizing will not enthuse or unite workers.
- Keep it relevant. A team-building exercise can address a real work place problem, or it can focus on developing interpersonal skills.

- Involve managers and workers in designing the team-building exercise. Establish clear goals for your time together.
- Take everyone out of the work environment to another location. This helps folks relax and it minimizes distractions.
- Select an “appropriate” exercise.

I love the television commercial in which a tall manager is talking to his subordinate, a gecko. The manager jumps up and suggests they recreate a common “trust” team-building exercise, where one person falls back into the arms of his co-worker. As the commercial “goes black,” the tiny green critter sputters that he might not be able to catch his boss. And then....squish!

Workers come in all sizes and shapes. Some may have limitations that prevent participation in active team-building exercises, and it’s important to respect that. By involving workers in designing exercises and by creating a variety of roles, participation can be inclusive and appropriate.

- Make it fun. Team building can be used as “ice breakers” to begin subject-oriented training, or as stress relievers.

Darron Nilsson, president of River’s End Rafting in Bakersfield, reports receiving an increasing number of requests from local businesses to use Kern River rafting sessions and rock climbing exercises for team building.

“It has become very clear to me over the years that outdoor activities are very effective ways to get people to work together,” Nilsson says. “It brings us back to simpler times when all we had was each other. If we can’t rely on the person next to us, we may not make it. Rafting and rock climbing are excellent examples of activities that absolutely require team work.”

In addition to “fun sessions,” River’s End Rafting offers structured team-building exercises on the river. The company also offers rental of a portable climbing wall, which can be brought to companies or other locations for team-building exercises.

He recalled a recent session involving local firefighters, who partnered with each other – one blind folded and strapped into a harness, and the other “coaching” his partner up the climbing wall with a belay rope.

While every employee may not be capable of climbing the wall, other roles – such as coaching and cheering – are assigned to team members, said Nilsson, stressing the importance of team-building.

Baseball great Babe Ruth said it best: "The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don't play together, the club won't be worth a dime."

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