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EMPLOYEE MORALE

Adventures in extreme workplace team building

by Michael P. Stafford

Does your company have a workplace morale problem? Do you want to foster improved collaboration and cooperation among employees as they work together to solve a problem? Have you ever considered addressing those concerns by simulating life-threatening crisis situations? And no, I don't mean the annual company fire drill! If you haven't, then perhaps you've never heard of Survival Systems USA in Connecticut.

Can't we just go out for nachos instead?

The *New York Times* recently reported on Survival Systems, which offers realistic survival skills training as a corporate team-building activity, complete with simulated airplane crashes into the water. The point, of course, is to build more trust, communication skills, and efficient and effective cooperation among your staff. After all, there's nothing like some fear and panic to bring the office team together!

But is subjecting your workforce to an extreme life-and-death survival scenario really an effective way to bring them together as a team? Is inflicting

pseudo trauma the key to a cohesive workforce and good camaraderie? Perhaps not.

The modern workplace doesn't usually force us to face our primordial fear of death — the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has seen to that. If you want to test how your employees will react to "stressful situations" and problem solve cooperatively in a crisis, then simulating scenarios involving clearing printer jams, changing toner cartridges, or troubleshooting computer problems after the help desk folks have left for the day might be more effective than recreating a scene straight out of *Sully* (sans Tom Hanks, of course).

More broadly, there's ample reason to question the efficacy of extreme team-building experiences. First, corporate team-building exercises are generally ineffective and loathed by employees, who typically report that they are either boring, embarrassing, or utterly useless.

Guardian report on survey data from 2012 in the United Kingdom, within the realm of corporate team-building activities: "Adrenaline experiences like speed-boating and bungee jumping are considered the least effective team-building activities, followed by trust exercises such as being blindfolded and led by colleagues. Those deemed most effective are social events like going out for a drink or a meal, followed by volunteering and charity work."

Bottom line

So forget the blindfolded backward pushes and the plane crashes complete with faux helicopter downwash, save on the costs of trainers and consultants, and simply send the office staff out to volunteer for a day at your local soup kitchen instead.

The author can be reached at mstafford@ycst.com.

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