

## Team-building events take center stage at meetings

BY JANE ADLER

**T**eam-building is back. At its annual winter meeting, the Chicago-based IT consulting firm Acquity Group LLC holds a team-building event to bolster corporate goals. One year the company's 190 employees were divided into 12 teams and then told to build a mountain. The theme: "Summit 2010," referring to the company's objective to hit revenues of \$100 million by the year 2010.

Each team had \$100 to spend at a "base camp," a table with silly materials such as toothpicks, hangers, toilet paper, and "anything you could find in the dollar store," according to Jim Newman, Acquity's executive vice president of delivery services.

Teams had an hour to construct a mountain. But every 15 minutes a whistle would blow and an unforeseen event would occur—just like real life. In one instance, team captains were allowed to raid items from other teams' tables. At the end, the mountains were judged on realism, corporate branding, and creativity. One team even built a person into their peak.

"It was hilarious, crazy and goofy," says Mr. Newman, who, at the last meeting, had employee teams build little sailboats to race. "It also helped us reinforce the objectives of the company."

After falling out of favor with meeting planners in the late 1990s, team-building programs are popular once again. Corporations want ways to keep employees involved and get them talking to each other. The recent wave of mergers and globalization have only accelerated the trend, experts say. Today's workers have to be able to get along with a variety of people across department, company and even national boundaries.

But today's team-building programs are different from the old-style programs of the past. Those tended to emphasize the physical (think falling backwards into the arms of a stranger) which often drew sighs from skeptical employees.

Now the trend is toward collaborative programs, such as cooking where teams create meals together and then share them. Another example: orienteering programs—some based on reality TV shows like "The Amazing Race"—where members work together to find a destination using clues. Or, teams may spend a day working for a charity, say, helping to build a house for Habitat for Humanity.

"There's a real focus today on team-building for a purpose," says Dick Axelrod, president at the Axelrod Group Inc., a Wilmette consulting firm.

Though many team-building programs are designed to help workers to get to know each other, some events have serious corporate objectives. A popular new program, for instance, is "Speak Easy," offered by the Corporate Learning Institute Inc., of Lisle, a corporate training and development firm. For the event, the meeting room is divided into small seating areas with comfortable living room furniture. A wait staff serves desserts. Groups of five to eight people sit together and have a relaxed conversation about a serious topic, such as mentoring or leadership.

Each small group has a facilitator to guide the discussion. The session lasts about two hours and participants not only get to know each other, but also generate real ideas that are funneled back to company managers. "Gone are the days of silly corporate Olympics," says Tim Buividas, chief executive at the Corporate Learning Institute.

Software consulting firm Model Metrics LLC, Chicago, uses team-building events at its meetings to recruit and retain employees. The firm competes for workers with high-profile firms such as Accenture and McKinsey & Co., according to Model Metrics President Adam Caplan. "It's critical that people love working here." The events generate a positive buzz in the consulting community, Mr. Caplan adds. The events also encourage interaction between employees on the

technical side of the business and those in consulting. Recognizing that not everyone likes the same activities, Mr. Caplan alternates action-oriented events with more peaceful pursuits. Not long ago, the group raced go-karts at Chicago Indoor Racing in Buffalo Grove. Another time the group took a cooking class at the downtown Macy's store. Meeting planners have a wide array of program choices. Hour-long events can be squeezed into half-day sessions; longer events can take up as much as a day at a big convention. Teambonding.com opened an office here in Chicago last October. Calling itself the team-building department store, the service offers 65 different programs. "We try to stay on top of trends," says David Goldstein, owner of the Boston-based company. Popular program themes are reality and survivor-type events based on TV shows. For one client, the company created a film festival. Employee teams, in Chicago, Barcelona and Singapore, were given a camera and told to make a movie about a new product. The movies were then shown at a dinner which included an awards ceremony.

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**+ TEAM-BUILDING FROM PAGE BB1**

backdrop. Teams solve a series of challenges, including one that gives each team a list of images to capture on digital cameras.

Fun-type team events cost anywhere from about \$30 to \$200 per person, depending on the program. Custom programs with a serious business objective and follow up consultations can cost as much \$10,000 a day.

As fun as some of the events sound, managers say there are always those who are hesitant or downright hostile about joining in. At insurance company Aflac Inc., Illinois managers have a quarterly meeting that includes a team program. "You always have negative individuals who are not willing to participate," says Tommy Johnson Jr., state sales coordinator. Most often, skeptics join in, he says, but their attitude isn't right. "We try and get them to go along as best we can. It's our responsibility to come up with ways to get them involved."

No-fail activities at the outset (icebreakers) can help boost participation. For example, consultant Susan Heathfield, of Williamston, Mich., asks small groups to find 10 things they all have in common. "It gets people laughing and helps them focus on commonalities," she says. Another strategy—one that works well with teams that have a serious project to tackle—is to have the team create rules for the group.

In order to elicit cooperation, meeting planners are also careful about event timing. The best advice: Don't schedule a program just before a big work project is due. And don't plan a weekend event when workers want time off.