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Fun, games and the bottom line

Companies are splashing out on team events aimed at boosting morale . Perhaps a simple ‘thank you’ might work better. **LAURA CENCIGH-ALBULARIO** reports

DO paintball tournaments boost a company’s bottom line? Can team cooking classes help corporations rake in the cash or will playing out *The Amazing Race* lead to amazing business outcomes?

One thing is certain: corporate team-building has become big business. Organisations which would once bond over a Friday night beer or a game of golf are getting creative when it comes to boosting staff morale and teamwork ethic.

Google, for example, chose challenges based around reality television shows *Survivor* and *Amazing Race* for some recent bonding days, while Amex sent its personnel to cooking school.

RedBalloon spokeswoman, Kate Rolfe, says today’s companies are prepared to spend significant sums on team building-events, with their 1400 corporate clients spending an average of \$150 per person per event. The most popular activities are those which provide a fun metaphor for workplace challenges, with elements of competition, deadlines, lateral thinking and working together to achieve the best outcome.

“There are things like drumming workshops where the team has to work together to find the beat, or sailing regattas where they’re trying to beat the other team,” Ms Rolfe says. Dwain Richardson, director of recreational team building company, Corporate Challenge, believes recreational challenges outside the workplace not only allow valuable bonding time, but also provide a forum for highlighting individual abilities.

“In a recreational team environment, workplace roles don’t apply, which allows managers to see the strengths and weaknesses of their employees,” he says.

“The more that managers can bite their tongue, the more they get out of an event by watching and seeing how employees operate.

“In a recreational environment, the elements of working as a team become clearer. Observing this can help them to tailor the way they deal with these individuals within the workplace.”

Mr Richardson says recent reality television programs have shaped the popular styles of team building exercises, with the *Masterchef* phenomenon piquing interest in team-building cooking challenges, and *Survivor* inspiring companies to put bandanna-wearing staff through the ropes.

Another trend is socially responsible team-building, such as the Bikes for Tykes program, which requires teams to work together to build bikes for disadvantaged children.

However, the results of RedBalloon’s latest Pleasure Survey, which gauges the sentiments of employees, suggest that a simple “thank you” for a job well-done can be a more powerful motivator than the most elaborate team-building

events.

When asked what would motivate them to be more productive, 62 per cent of respondents said acknowledgement and recognition for their contribution was enough, yet only 44 per cent said this “pat on the back” culture existed in their workplace.

“A simple ‘thank you’ has always been free and this is the one thing employers have complete control over,” Ms Rolfe says. “Ongoing praise and recognition will help to mitigate anxiety and uncertainty; both unwelcome productivity drains from the GFC.”

Dr Peter Langford, an organisational psychologist and director of research and consulting company, Voice Project, agrees.

The Voice Project recently conducted extensive research around levels of employee satisfaction, and found that most respondents saw their relationships with senior and middle managers as more important than those they held with immediate co-workers. Interestingly, however, it was these relationships with senior and middle managers with which they were most dissatisfied.

Dr Langford concludes that one of the most important things a company can do to keep its staff satisfied and motivated is to improve the communication streams with upper levels of management. “There’s a lot of focus on the team – the immediate co-workers and supervisors, but a much bigger factor is trust and engagement with senior management,” he explains.

“With this over-focus on the immediate team, leaders are not fully recognising and living up to the important role of developing relationships with staff at all levels, of being there and being more real.”

According to Dr Langford, the current uncertain business climate has made the accessibility of higher decision-makers all the more important: “When there’s fear around, people look to their leaders for reassurance. They need to get out there, go through the state of play, visit departments, let people know what’s happening and what they’re doing.

“Face-to-face communication with staff is more effective than memos, blogs or newsletters.”

As for those paintball days, cooking classes and amazing races, Dr Langford says they still have a place within the corporate world, provided that they’re used as a means of rewarding, rather than motivating staff. And, ideally, rather than paintball with your immediate co-workers, “perhaps paintball with your senior managers”.



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