

## **When is team building pointless? By Alison Clayton-Smith**

‘We’ve got an away day coming up and we want a team building exercise for the afternoon. It needs to be fun but not too embarrassing for people. There are 40 of us and we’ve got an hour and a half slot. What do you suggest?’

This is the sort of request that makes me smile and despair at the same time. The problem is we use the term ‘team building’ without necessarily defining what we mean. And first of all we need to clarify what we mean by ‘team’.

### **What is a ‘team’?**

We could spend a lot of time defining the word ‘team’. Indeed many academics have done just that. One such definition is:

‘A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.’<sup>1</sup>

A team is different from a group because a group can be a collection of individuals who don’t rely on each other to achieve a common purpose. Now without getting into a long discussion, I do hold the view that any group of people can be a team if they decide to be, even if their level of interdependency on each other is small. For example, a department can be viewed as a team. All the individuals are working towards delivering on the service that department offers. Without each individual the department could not, in theory, achieve its objectives. However, the larger the group the more difficult it becomes to work as a real team because of the increasing complexity of communication, information and time to make decisions. Arguably the sometimes pained question ‘Are we a team?’ could be answered by saying ‘Well yes if you’re behaving, or trying to behave, like one.’

### **What is ‘team building’?**

Let’s take our 40 people from a department or practice group. Are they a real team? Do they depend on each other regularly to achieve their goals? Are there common goals? It depends at what level you’re looking. But when someone asks for ‘team building’ what do they really mean? Do they mean that they want this group of 40 people to develop a common purpose and goals, to recognise each others strengths and challenges, to agree ways of working together and

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<sup>1</sup> Beyerlein, M.M., Johnson, D.A. and Beyerlein, S.T. (eds), Virtual Teams, in *Advances in Interdisciplinary Studies of Work Teams*, Vol.8, 2001, Elsevier Science Ltd, Oxford

holding each other accountable? Not necessarily. Sometimes if we probe, what they want is for everyone to get to know each other better, to break down the formal barriers and encourage productive relationships. Oh yes, and usually have a bit of fun.

So in such a situation we might want to talk about building 'teamwork' instead. The UK Centre for Legal Education defines 'teamwork', as:

'the ability to establish working relations with others, to interact effectively, and to promote productive cooperation'

The term 'teamwork' can therefore be applied to any interaction that involves 2 or more people.

### **Isn't it all just semantics?**

Well yes and no. In one way, yes it is just semantics. The manager who is requesting a team building activity isn't necessarily that interested in debating whether their group is really a team or not. Often they just want an activity to get people together. No, in the sense that even if they aren't interested we, as learning and development professionals, ought to be. That way we can be clear about the type of intervention we're designing. There is no point putting something together which explores how well all 40 people work together and coordinate activities as a team, if they don't ever really need to do that. There is value in using activities which allow them to mix with people in the group they don't normally.

Maybe I am just being a pedant, and maybe everyone already understands what team building is, but my experience of requests suggests that there is room for improvement. Hopefully with each request we can challenge managers to consider what constitutes a team. Then when a group does need to be a team, there is real commitment to building and developing that team rather than just spending a couple of hours getting to know each other and having fun.

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