

Title:

Not Another Ice-Breaker! Team Building with a Purpose

Word Count:

1005

Summary:

Offsites are a very effective means to getting the team focused on solving a business problem, defining a strategy, or creating a revolutionary way of doing things. Done well, an offsite not only puts great minds together to address a business issue but it also builds better teams that work more effectively together and get more things done. Done poorly, an offsite will be viewed as a huge waste of time and will poorly reflect on you as a leader. Get seven tips for holding great team-building offsites.

Keywords:

Leadership, Team Building, Management

Article Body:

"We just don't work as a team!" Janet, a group manager for a large insurance company, was complaining to Larry, her human resources consultant. "Everyone just seems to do their own thing, they don't share information, don't try to help each other, and don't seem to care about anyone else's problems. What we need is a team building offsite!" Janet and Larry decided to put together a two-day offsite for the team at a resort about two hours away from work. Janet wanted immediate focus on the problem so Larry worked double-time to put together the event to be held later in the month. Larry put together an agenda full of trust-building exercises, ice-breakers, and brainstorming sessions on how the team could work better together.

On the first day of the offsite only about half of Janet's team had shown up; the other half were working on a hot project that needed to be completed later in the week. The remaining team members politely participated in the team building exercises, but didn't seem very interested in the activities as they felt too "squishy." Because Janet wanted to focus the offsite on team building, there was no clearly stated business purpose for the event. The brainstorming sessions were good, but no tangible actions were taken down for the team to follow up on. In short, the offsite was met with a resounding thud from the team and was a dismal failure.

To some, this may be a gross exaggeration; but to others, this closely resembles

an offsite they attended or were responsible for planning. Offsites are a very effective means to getting the team focused on solving a business problem, defining a strategy, or creating a revolutionary way of doing things. A very key by-product of offsites, though, is the team-building that occurs while addressing business issue at hand. Done well, an offsite not only puts great minds together to address a business issue but it also builds better teams that work more effectively together and get more things done. Done poorly, an offsite will be viewed as a huge waste of time and will poorly reflect on you as a leader.

How can you ensure your offsites are successful at building teams and getting things done at the same time? Consider the following simple tips:

Have a clear purpose for the offsite - Define some clear business reason for having the offsite. Consider things such as developing strategic goals for the upcoming fiscal year, account planning for strategic customers, or generating solution alternatives for a key business problem. If you make the goal of the offsite "Team Building" then your team is likely to look at the offsite as a waste of time that will have no real business benefit. Do your team building under the guise of solving a problem or defining the future.

Balance work with play - All work and the offsite becomes too fatiguing. All play and it becomes a boondoggle. Balance your agenda with a combination of work sessions with some fun team-building events sprinkled in. Make sure the "play" events you define are something everyone can participate in and go beyond the overused catch-me-as-I-fall-backwards event. Better still, ask the team what types of things they'd like to do during playtime.

Provide plenty of time for networking - Give ample time during the day and evening for the team to have snacks, enjoy beverages, and just talk about whatever strikes them. Team building starts with building relationships, and building relationships starts with getting to know each other. Allow for networking time to be free and unscripted and let the team enjoy some casual conversation with each other.

Don't hold the offsite during a crunch period - When you do hold your offsite, you don't want your team members to be checking email every five minutes or constantly leaving to make important calls. Do your best to hold an offsite during a "slow" time in your business. As with most businesses, there will probably never be an optimal time to hold an offsite but do your best to avoid times when team members are already burning the midnight oil.

Make it an overnight event - Some of the best offsites I've held were those

where the team ate dinner together, enjoyed a couple of drinks, and stayed up late discussing major business problems or brainstorming on a radically new strategy. These late night sessions were valuable in that team members put their heads together to address some problem or opportunity. More importantly, team members built relationships which provided an outstanding foundation for strong teams.

Don't make the team work overtime to "make up" the time spent at the offsite - If you're going to have an offsite, allow the team to move some of their other commitments out a few days so they don't feel the pressure of needing to get their work done while at the offsite. The last thing you want is your team thinking about working late because of wasted time at a dumb offsite. Relax some of the deliverables and let the team focus on the offsite, not on what work isn't getting done.

Put together a follow-up plan to continue the work from the offsite - One of the most frustrating things I've experienced with offsites was the lack of a follow-up plan to implement some of the great ideas which came out of the offsite. Put together an actionable follow-up plan with tasks, dates, and owners and you'll keep the excitement going out of the offsite and will get some of the great ideas implemented. Neglect putting together a follow-up plan and you'll have an offsite that the team sees as a waste of time.

Offsites can be a very effective means of getting things done and building outstanding teams at the same time. Just make sure to follow these simple steps and you'll better ensure your next offsite is a huge success.