

Cooking Up Effective Team Building

By Howard Prager

Your executive vice president is nervously sweating over a hot stove under the watchful eye of your company's newest associate. Across the room, your chief financial officer and the plant manager are putting finishing touches on an elaborate table display. No, it's not another office birthday party, but one of the newest concepts in team building—creating a banquet.

According to the American Society for Training & Development, team training is one of the hottest trends in human resources. However, while more and more companies are changing to team structures, individuals—especially long-time employees—are still accustomed to working on their own. Team-based structures require people to be adaptable, forming and re-forming work relationships quickly and smoothly. That new workplace configuration has companies clamoring for a variety of team building exercises, forcing them to find new ways to develop teamwork as workforce diversity grows. A few years ago, physical-challenge exercises were the rage. Though such activities have their place, they aren't suited to every team and every team building need.

The demand for effective team training has spawned some inventive new concepts—from building towers and bridges to cooking up a feast, an activity the Lake Forest Graduate School of Management calls Team Banquets. The program was developed with an internationally recognized executive chef to bring together people with different knowledge, skills, and experience to accomplish a single goal to create a banquet. It's based on the discovery that some of the most effective, efficient teams in the world are in the kitchens of fine restaurants, where skilled professionals provide models of organization, communication, and results-oriented processes.

"The commercial kitchen offers a perfect example of effective teamwork," says executive chef Jim Osborn. "You have people with different knowledge and skill levels all working to accomplish a single goal: the evening's food service. There aren't many other industries where the

outcomes of teamwork, leadership, and accountability are so concrete."

The Team Banquet brings together 25 to 30 employees—challenging them to prepare a gourmet banquet for themselves within two hours, using only the raw ingredients and equipment provided. One head chef and five sous chefs (assistants) are chosen randomly in advance. A mail clerk might be in charge while a group manager serves as an assistant. Each team is assigned a specific portion of the banquet preparation, from main entree to decorations and food presentation. Safety instructions are provided, recipes are not. Teams must rely on their own knowledge and creativity in devising the dishes they will serve.

Kristi Lynch, customer service manager for Quebecor Printing Mt. Morris, was struck by the similarities between the food service and printing industries. "I didn't think the food industry involved so much teamwork, time management, and organization," she says, "but the parallels to the printing industry made this a valuable experience. It put in perspective how everyone depends on one another to get the job done."

Lynch, who worked on the salads team, notes that although the initial response to the evening's assignment was incredulity, it didn't take long for the entire group to pull together. "We looked over the ingredients and got to work. Everyone just clicked, and it was great to see that," she says. "We found that effective communication and following procedures were essential in our being able to produce a quality product, just as they are in the printing industry."

As Lynch attests, a banquet can provide an excellent analogy to the workplace. No one person could create an entire banquet in such a short time, everyone must cooperate to create a quality end product, and even people who are comfortable cooking are put into an unfamiliar role among co-workers that pushes them beyond their own experience. That causes uncertainty about the ability to transfer lessons to a business environment. So, how do you determine which team programs will be right for your employees? Here are some guidelines. Look for a program that fits your

corporate culture. Employees in a casual work atmosphere may be more receptive to a free-flowing format than a formal classroom structure.

Be sure that the outcome meets your training goals. If your company is changing rapidly and employees must be agile so they can form and re-form new teams quickly, look for an exercise that puts them in that situation.

Find training that will translate skills back to your workplace. The Team Banquet encourages team members to learn more about each person's abilities so that the group can determine how to best allocate work assignments. Using an exercise that serves as a metaphor for the workplace helps employees apply new learning to their jobs. Place people outside of their comfort zones, but not so far that they're too scared to get the message. A high-ropes, physical-challenge exercise may be fine for a confident group of young people, but others may be so focused on not getting hurt that they miss the point. A mental, rather than physical, challenge may be better.

Get away to a different environment. Leaving the familiarity of the workplace helps people avoid falling into old patterns and opens the way for new thinking.

Have a way to evaluate the success of the activity. Does it lend itself to determining how employees did individually? As a group? Can you identify lessons that can be taken back to the job? At the end of the TEAM Banquet, participants are able to see how well they came together, what their individual contributions were, whether the executive and sous chefs exhibited leadership, and whether the result of their efforts were good or bad (the food was hot or cold, tasty or tasteless, on time or late, and so forth).

The workplace is changing so rapidly that employees at every level must learn to stretch their abilities and adapt in order to remain valuable assets to their organizations. We'll be seeing a lot of new team training programs. Careful evaluation of each will help match the right program with your employees.

Bon appetit!

Howard Prager is director of corporate leadership programs at Lake Forest Graduate School of Management in Lake Forest, Illinois; 847.234.5005, x226.

Send short, how-to articles on training basics to Training 101, Training & Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043. Email T101@astd.org.