

# You Can Take the Manager out of the Woods, but . . .

Transference back to the workplace is what distinguishes sound adventure learning from just another romp in the great outdoors.

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By ADRIENNE L. GALL

Okay. So you've spent several days in the wilderness with your work team and you feel better, more invigorated, than you have in years. And you've been told by the facilitators that there's solid theory and a proven philosophy behind what you've just experienced.

It's easy to feel great when you're away from stale office air, wearing your favorite weekend duds, getting some exercise, and forming new relationships with your coworkers. But what happens when you return to the workplace on Monday, suited up and facing harsh realities such as ringing phones and a pile of paperwork? Knowing how to maintain the good feelings generated and the lessons learned during your days away is inarguably the key to making your outdoor experiential training more than just an expensive walk on the wild side.

## Sources of resistance

A work group considering investing in outdoor experiential learning usually encounters some resistance from the beginning, the most common sources being fear

of physical risk and misunderstanding of the training's proper applications.

Let's face it: the athletic are more likely to jump at such opportunities, while sedentary types are more apt to resist. In order for a work group to undertake experiential learning, each individual must understand that physical *danger* is not part of this training technique—physical *challenge* is.

Even if several days away from the office sounds appealing to everyone in the group, there are going to be those who question exactly what pertinence outdoor exercises have to the workplace. This is where realistic expectations and an understanding of the philosophy behind outdoor experiential learning are important.

"The primary objective of this type of training is not to take people into an outdoor setting and draw direct parallels between that experience and experiences in the office," explains Roy Yamahiro, vice president of human resource development at Federal Express Corp. and the main proponent of that company's adventure learning programs. So what's the point? "If you can get people to risk trying something that they are sure they *can't* do and they discover they *can* do it, that realization translates into their whole attitude about how they approach life, how they approach work, how they approach managing."

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Gall is managing editor of the Training & Development Journal.

## Beginning the process

Aside from the participants, of course, the most important element in any corporate outdoor experience is the group that will be going with you into the woods—or onto the rocks or boarding the sailboat—and facilitating the exercises. In addition to having people on staff who are outdoor experts, experiential training providers must have a solid background in organizational development, team building, organizational communication and dynamics, change management, leadership development and supervisory training; all the aspects of the work world that, when not running smoothly, keep individuals or work groups from being effective and productive.

A tall order? You better believe it. But unless the people facilitating your outdoor experience have these skills, experts agree that all your time and money will be spent for naught.

Reputable providers (see a list of several following this article) agree that outdoor experiential training must include several elements to make it work and continue to pay off for the participants and their employer:

- orientation meetings with key participants to calm fears, instill positive attitudes, and establish realistic expectations;
- a preliminary assessment of the participating work group or individual's needs and what they hope to accomplish with the training;
- ongoing tie-ins and metaphors linked to the work environment;
- carefully facilitated discussion among the participants during the course of the training;
- development of action plans before returning to the workplace;
- followup by both the provider and the participants;
- commitment from top management.

## You can't be serious

Understanding that not everyone is a star athlete, one of the first myths providers attempt to dispel in an orientation session is that everyone will be expected to leap tall buildings in a single bound. What *is* expected is that individuals will set what they consider to be their own reasonable physical limits. True physical risk taking is not the goal here; emotional and intellectual risk taking is. Experts explain, though, that *perceived* physical risk is what makes the program exciting and challenges participants to do their personal best.

Providers also realize that not everyone enjoys communing with nature, so fears about subterranean creepy crawlies coming out of the swamp at night are quickly put to rest. It's hard to anticipate an outdoor training adventure positively if you're worried about being bitten by snakes or ticks.

After calming basic fears concerning physical peril, providers generally try to begin achieving a sense of excitement and commitment on the part of participants.

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Some will show videotapes or slide shows of previous groups' experiences and explain exercises that may be used and why. Some providers will also take this opportunity to put participants through some simple exercises.

## What I really need is . . .

To design a highly relevant program, providers must find out exactly what the work group or individual sees as its strengths and weaknesses and what kinds of problems must be addressed. Some groups find that involving their own organizational development consultant in this process is helpful.

For example, National Tire Wholesale (NTW) and Atlanta Brake and Alignment (ABA) had been working with organizational consultants before deciding to try an outdoor experiential approach. The companies were wrestling with the problem of how to keep each company operating as specialists in their respective markets while remaining united under the same formalized management principles. "We decided to involve those consultants so that the provider could get a professional overview of the company not shaded by the personalities of the officers of the companies," explains NTW President David Lindenbaum.

Dave Spalding, president of American Hydrotech, also felt that using a facilitator who was already familiar with his company could bring the adventure training provider "up to speed as to where we were in our strengths and weaknesses." American Hydrotech's department heads and several regional managers used their outdoor training to improve their teamwork and communications.

To get the most out of the training, the

majority of providers advise limiting a single outing's focus. Oliver Porter, sales vice president of AT&T's southern region general business markets and recent participant in an outdoor training program, agrees: "If it is a good organization that is putting it on, they can help you grow and shape things through the program. But it is very helpful if you narrow what you want to one or two things. Don't expect it to be a panacea." Porter decided to use this type of training as a way to help his region

through difficult times during the massive reorganization of AT&T in 1984.

Providers emphasize that preplanning is one of the keys to making this type of training useful and lasting. NTW's Lindenbaum agrees: "The outcome is directly proportional to the amount of preplanning." This is especially true when you consider that much of the postcourse followup will relate to the goals and objectives established in the beginning.

## On with the show

Metaphors—as described in the two articles preceding this one—are important in experiential learning, just as they are in almost every training environment. As Roy Yamahiro says, "There is no direct parallel between rappelling off a cliff and anything in the workplace." But if you know you can master activities that you thought impossible for you, obstacles in the workplace often pale by comparison.

Most adventure training participants can name specific points in their outdoor experiences that had a profound, lasting impact on how they viewed themselves in the work environment. Lynn Feuling, director of service operations for Codex Corporation, a subsidiary of Motorola, remembers hanging on a shaky beam, trying to get the courage to walk across it, and listening to the provider: "Feuling, you do this all the time, don't you? You try to figure out how to do things perfectly, so that when you do it, you won't fail."

Feuling says the analogy hit him like a ton of bricks: "I came to realize that was the way I was going through life. By not taking risks, I was depriving myself of the good feelings of success. Now that I allow myself to fail, the exhilaration I feel when I do something successfully comes more

frequently because I'm taking more frequent chances."

During outdoor exercises with his work group, NTW's Lindenbaum discovered that his tendency to jump in and take charge during even a small emergency was more a hindrance than a help. At the end of his course, he and another senior executive with the same management style were given blindfolds with the suggestion that they put them on whenever they have the urge to get involved in operations which their subordinates can handle.

"It was really kind of a blow at first," recalls Lindenbaum. "But I keep the blindfold in my drawer all the time. Whenever I'm reminded that I need to let someone else solve a problem, I just tell them that it's their problem and ask them to report back to me when they've got the solution."

Sometimes, such revelations come during a specific exercise. But it is usually in discussions among group members at the end of a day of activities that these kinds of realizations occur. Outdoor experiential programs encourage constructive feedback between participants and ask individuals to share their perceptions of one another's behavior during the day's exercises. A carefully facilitated feedback session helps to build acceptance, trust, and understanding among the team members.

Providers agree that instructing people in how to give—and accept—positive criticism during feedback sessions is one of the most important ways to help make

with this kind of followup activity.

Following its adventure training experience, the senior management team of Provident Financial Services put together a mission statement addressing such questions as: What is this company about? What is our mission? How do we want to run our business? Armed with a mission statement and an enumeration of the company's values and principles, the senior managers defined seven strategic objectives by asking what they had to accomplish and what tasks had the highest priority.

After deciding on their short- and long-range goals, the management team at American Hydrotech developed a task list—or action plan—of the specific steps needed to accomplish each goal. Dave Spalding credits this to their provider, who "gave us good direction and a good team approach to problem solving. We've been able to come back and carry it on to the next step ourselves in our business plan."

If you want the training to stick, though, followup can't end with establishing a plan. Bob Brady, president and CEO of Provident Financial Services, tells what his company did a year after designing its mission statement and implementing its strategic objectives. "We met with the senior group again, looked at what we said before, what we wanted to do now, and modified our mission statement slightly. And then we modified some of the old objectives and added eight new ones."

together less and less as an intact group. So, typically, we are interacting with people who don't understand that experience and don't know how to relate to metaphors we might want to use."

Another potential obstacle to transference is the lack of periodic followup by participants after they've been back in the workplace. Even though people will continue for years to profit personally from the lessons of an adventure learning experience, they often have trouble applying them over the long term in the face of daily business pressures.

If a group or individual only commits to a one-day program, transference is also very limited. Most providers agree that to obtain maximum carryover, longer programs are essential. Herman Maynard, manager at Du Pont of a sales group and an adventure training veteran, explains: "What you're doing when you participate in one of these programs is developing a bonding in three or four days that could take three or four years to occur in the workplace, given the low frequency of contact and natural barriers to openness and trust that occur in the business environment."

## The big fix

What do all of the above problems have in common? They are all symptoms of a lack of upper management commitment to outdoor experiential learning—an important contributor to long-term program payoff. Sure, the participants come up with mission statements and action plans. But unless those group or individual plans are built around overall organizational objectives, are recognized as valid, and are encouraged by upper management, they are likely to fall into disrepair.

Provident Financial Services is an example of just what an organization can accomplish if it's willing to use the outdoor experiential opportunity to full advantage. Over a year and a half ago, the credit loan division of Boston's Provident Institute for Savings was becoming a separate mortgage company under the parent firm. "It was really a golden opportunity to do things right, from scratch," recalls Bob Brady. The senior management group began the process by participating in two separate programs: the first to begin developing a visionary planning process, the second for team building.

Then the senior managers developed the mission statement, values, principles, and strategic goals mentioned earlier. But the effort didn't stop there. Senior manage-

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participant goals more attainable. As one provider put it, "Transference begins with helping people extract their own learning from how they work together and what they really need to work on." This echoes a basic premise of all attempts at teaching adults: make people responsible for their own learning.

## Action!

Before returning to the work environment, participants should summarize what they've learned and devise a preliminary plan outlining how they hope to achieve the goals and objectives set at the beginning of the outdoor experience. These preliminary ideas then must be developed into full-blown action plans in order for them to have any lasting effect. A good provider will be willing to help your group

## Clouds on the horizon

Most providers have a policy of checking participants' progress a couple of weeks after the experience, and then a couple of months after that. They see how learning is holding up and help iron out any related problems that have come up in the meantime.

Perhaps one of the most common transference problems arises when work teams who attend outdoor training activities are split up later through changes at work. This is what happened at Codex Corporation after Lynn Feuling's sales group went through their experiential training.

"We've gone through a tremendous amount of reorganization and the ripple effect has caused many changes," says Feuling. "I report to different people now and those of us who went on the course work

ment decided to take the whole process through the entire organization; they met with 17 different work groups. Brady remembers the process well:

"We put all 140 employees through the same program and defined mission statements and objectives for each entity in support of the overall corporate goals and mission statement. Then we assigned responsibilities to people in those departments to achieve different objectives."

Management put a time frame of one year on the process, after which they took stock of what had happened. "The results are unbelievable," claims Brady. "Of course everything isn't done exactly the way we thought it would be. But we did some 70-odd objectives and half of them are completely finished and the other half are on schedule and going to be finished shortly. The point is, they are all being worked on." The company currently is reevaluating all mission statements and objectives and developing new ones.

How do they find the time to do all this followup? It isn't easy, according to Brady. "This year was crazy for mortgage banking. We got very busy and it would have been easy to let something like this slide. But at one point we just had to say, 'Hold the phone! We're letting this thing go,' and we got right back on it."

Employees who have come on board since the initial program aren't left out in the cold, either. Provident Financial Services puts new employees through a one-day program. The company finds that because the bulk of the workforce has been through an intensive wilderness experience, a one-day program is sufficient to bring new people up to speed and put them on the same wavelength as the old-timers.

Of course, not all organizations can start from scratch as Provident Financial Services could. But it's obvious from this example that management support and encouragement are critical elements in a program's success.

## Do it yourself

More and more organizations are so sold on outdoor experiential learning that they are developing their own in-house programs.

Federal Express's Yamahiro has about 20 years of experience under his belt designing adventure training courses and has put it to good use at Federal. The company has structured its own outdoor experiences in conjunction with a leadership skills development program. "You can't teach people leadership skills unless you

provide an opportunity to experience what it means to be a leader," explains Yamahiro. "We looked at the competencies we wanted our leaders to have and then structured outdoor experiences that would demonstrate those competencies."

Federal Express's leadership program is built around an orienteering course. The system works by a process of elimination. "We try to identify those who lead and those who follow. Then we remove the leaders and have the team continue the program, without telling them what they should be doing. We just let it keep evolving."

## Evidence of these programs' return on investment falls into two categories: hard dollar-and-cents figures and personal impact

Corporate officers at Federal Express select operating managers for 18-month stints as facilitators in the leadership institute. These individuals are chosen because they are considered outstanding examples of what upper management considers good managers to be: they are generally money-makers for the company, are good problem solvers, and have loyal staffs with high morale. These managers work with Yamahiro and with adventure training experts to design programs that suit the company's diverse needs.

Norton Company, a Worcester, Massachusetts-based manufacturer with offices throughout the U.S. and Europe, had been participating in outdoor experiential training through an outside provider since 1978. But in 1983, they decided to make it an in-house effort, and in 1985 they expanded to offer programs to other companies. The company now has three training sites, one on each U.S. coast and one in the U.K.

Norton's human resource staff has solid experience both in outdoor management training programs and in corporate organization and training and development. That staff background, coupled with in-house program design, assures Norton of training programs that meet the needs of its various divisions.

Caren Voeller, manufacturing supervisor of the company's high-performance ceramics division, has two experiences with Norton's in-house adventure training programs: one of them was for the purpose of team building for her department, and the other was for her leadership development. Voeller points to a unique facet of

the Norton programs that she feels contributes to their success:

"To help keep the training linked to the workplace and to keep it going, it is recommended that you choose a coach-mentor. This is somebody that you report to weekly concerning your action plan, what is going on, how you feel, that sort of thing. This helps you commit to your plan because you have to come up with something every week that's aimed at following it." Voeller's mentor is her immediate supervisor, which the facilitators suggest is the best choice, although anyone from whom an individual can learn profes-

sionally is a good alternative.

Federal Express and Norton Company are not the only organizations that provide their own outdoor experiential learning. Some providers report that they are beginning to train human resource and training professionals in individual companies to take the adventure training reins. In fact, the experiential training requests of one particularly large company on the West Coast became so overwhelming for one provider that he could no longer handle them himself. "They could swallow us up if we let them!" he joked.

## It's free, right?

Wrong. Just as any other type of training, outdoor experiential learning has its cost even if it does offer the most fun this side of Disney World. Estimating the price is difficult, though. Numerous variables are involved, including the following:

■ **Site location.** If you must travel long distances to get to a site (for example, you're in Tennessee and your program is taking place in the Rockies), you will run up considerable travel expenses. Most providers will come to you, but they may charge larger fees for off-site setup.

■ **Package.** Packages that offer comprehensive assessment and followup will have higher rates, but remember that these elements are what make the program work. Some providers also have different levels of assessment and followup (for example, they will come back once, twice, or three times after you complete the program, depending upon your needs or desires).

■ *Degree of customization.* A program designed to meet unique needs is going to be more expensive than one requiring less customization. Companies that plan to send several groups through a program can save money because the course only has to be designed for the first group; cost for subsequent participants will be less.

■ *Group versus individual pricing.* Some providers charge per person, others per group.

■ *Duration of program.* Naturally, a three-day program will cost more than a two-day program.

■ *Exercises.* A program that includes river rafting, orienteering, and rappelling will probably cost more than a simple ropes course.

Most participants believe that whatever they spend, it is the best use they could ever get out of a dollar. "The money side of it is not that much more than meeting in some nice hotel, where everyone does their own voucher, their own travel, their own hotel bill, and then when you add it up, it's pretty expensive," observes AT&T's Oliver Porter. But in his opinion, the psychological impact of the outdoor experience yields a much greater return on investment that will last considerably longer than conferences at which speakers try to make points to a roomful of bored, cramped, drowsy managers.

## The bottom line

Let's not kid ourselves. Unless upper management can see that your sailing adventure in the Florida Keys paid off in a big way, there aren't going to be any more tanned work groups in February.

Evidence of these programs' return on investment falls into two very distinct categories: the *hard* dollar-and-cents figures and the *soft*, but no less important, personal impact.

David Lindenbaum of NTW says that in his case, the company more than doubled its profits in the year following its adventure training experiences. Oliver Porter reports similar outcomes at AT&T: "We've shown significant improvement in our revenue-to-expense relationships, we've dropped our cost per order; we've improved our quality, accuracy, and timeliness of orders; and we've improved our collections results." A specific example of what Porter is talking about: Before his regional managers participated in their program, their average cost per unit order was about 200% higher than it is today.

Return on investment of experiential programs has not been widely docu-

mented, but one study conducted by a private consulting firm several years ago at Martin Marietta—when Federal Express's Yamahiro was still there—revealed startling evidence that outdoor experiential learning can have substantial payoffs. Two work groups were compared on their yearly turnover rates, the only difference between the groups being that one participated in adventure learning and the other did not.

A year after the training took place, the annual turnover rate of the group that had not gone on the program was about 11 percent—the company average. The yearly turnover rate for the group that participated in the training program? Less than 1 percent. Given the high cost of turnover, reducing it by more than 10 percentage points has obvious financial merit. Other benefits to Martin Marietta of experiential training included increased promotions and transfers of participants and greater employee commitment.

An outcome of adventure learning that is just as important as those cited above—but not as easily quantified—is the positive psychological effect it has on participants. Of course, some really hard-line managers would argue that how employees feel is not management's concern—how employees perform is.

American Hydrotech's Dave Spalding strongly disagrees: "It's my philosophy that if an employee feels good about himself, feels good about his family, and feels good about his community, he's probably going to feel good about his work, too. I'm confident that the money spent is going to be paid back in spades, either through higher commitment, better teamwork, or better energy."

One interesting byproduct of outdoor training experiences mentioned time and again by providers is its effect on alcoholic and drug abusive participants. Stories abound these days of how much substance abuse costs American industry each year. But through experiential programs, many of these misdirected individuals gain a more positive image of themselves and a belief in their ability to control their own lives; setting themselves on a straighter path no longer seems an insurmountable task.

Herman Maynard put his finger on yet another motivational outcome of these types of programs that can translate into dollars: "When you've got people that are not in a trusting and supportive environment, a fair amount of their energies, both conscious and subconscious, are put into defending where they are. They're worrying about what the other person is going

to do to outpace them or stab them in the back. But once they develop support and trust, all the energy and time they put into defending themselves is freed up to focus on business."

## The value of time

Of course, it's going to be nearly impossible to convince some skeptics that sailing, whitewater rafting, or scaling a mountain can have positive effects on how people perform in the workplace, let alone influence a financial statement.

But outdoor experiential learning is still a fairly new field and has plenty of room to grow and to demonstrate its strength. "I think we've only seen the tip of the iceberg," Herman Maynard asserts. "I think there's a lot more it can do."



## Who Can I Call?

The following is a list of companies that provide outdoor experiential learning for corporate clients. While by no means exhaustive, this list includes providers we have interviewed and appear to be safe, reputable, well-staffed, and organizationally effective in delivering adventure training. Addresses are for company headquarters, but most providers either have other bases across the U.S. or will travel anywhere (almost!).

### **Charles Conn Associates**

Management Adventure  
27 Magnolia Ave.  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
617/492-0283  
Contact: Chuck Conn

### **Colorado Outward Bound**

945 Pennsylvania St.  
Denver, CO 80203  
303/837-0880  
Contact: Bruce Fitch, Stephen McCormick

### **Corporate Adventure**

11713 Bowman Green Dr.  
P.O. Box 2723  
Reston, VA 22090  
703/471-7745  
Contact: Meredith Kimbell

### **Donovon Associates**

Turnpike Rd.  
Norwich, VT 05055  
802/649-1681  
Contact: John Donovan

### **Executive Adventure, Inc.**

2030 Powers Ferry Rd.  
Suite 234  
Atlanta, GA 30339  
404/955-0071  
Contact: Bob Carr, Duffy Hickey

### **Executive Challenge**

Sargent Camp  
RFD 2  
Peterborough, NH 03458  
603/525-4482  
Contact: Vicky Keith

### **Executive Expeditions**

255 Village Pkwy.  
Suite V-5  
Marietta, GA 30067  
404/951-2173  
Contact: John D. Schmidt

### **Executive Ventures Group**

1665 Grant St.  
Suite 310  
Denver, CO 80203  
303/863-9913  
Contact: Reola McLeod, Eric Malmberg

### **Growing Edge, Inc.**

1900 N. Beauregard St.  
Alexandria, VA 22311  
703/931-2111  
Contact: Nancy Van Scoyoc

4768 Soquel Dr.

P.O. Box 1389  
Soquel, CA 95073  
408/479-0222  
Contact: Bill Underwood

7 High St.

Peterborough, NH 03458  
603/924-6353  
Contact: Robin Hulbert

### **High Impact Training (HIT)**

P.O. Box 3315  
Long Branch, NJ 07740  
201/870-6650  
Contact: Sabine Ehrhardt

### **Hollander Associates**

Box 165  
Dublin, NH 03444  
603/563-8194  
Contact: Allen Hollander

### **Hurricane Island Outward Bound**

P.O. Box 429  
Rockland, ME 04841  
207/594-5548  
Contact: Susan St. John-Rheault, Bob Gordon

### **Inner Quest, Inc.**

220 Queen St. NE  
Leesburg, VA 22075  
703/478-1078  
Contact: Randolph S. Smith

### **North Carolina Outward Bound**

121 N. Sterling St.  
Morganton, NC 28655  
704/437-6112  
Contact: John Flood, Jr.

### **Norton Company**

One New Bond St.  
Worcester, MA 01606  
617/853-1000  
Contact: Jim Hassinger, Tom Stich, Barry Carden

### **Pacific Crest Outward Bound**

0110 SW Bancroft St.  
Portland, OR 97201  
503/243-1993  
Darlene Gore

### **Pecos River Ranch**

P.O. Box 2172  
Santa Fe, NM 87501  
505/471-6500  
Contact: Larry Wilson

### **Project Adventure**

P.O. Box 100  
Hamilton, MA 01936  
617/468-7981  
Contact: Ann Smolowe, Dick Prouty