

Climbing the Ropes of Success

The series on adventure learning (March 1987) was outstanding! While reading it, I relived the many special experiences I have had on various "ropes" courses. I even called some of my clients to insist that they read these articles.

It's important to reinforce the positive outcomes of the ropes process for both group and individual development. I have often used ropes courses as a key component for team-building retreats for my clients. In one particular retreat, "the wall" became the perfect metaphor to help an executive team identify their blockage; they identified a major issue for each wooden plank of the wall and admitted that some of these planks had been self-imposed for many years.

I've found the ropes course to be so powerful that I have incorporated it into my internal consulting program. In fact, it led to a significant breakthrough for the employees of a major California bank who were attending my program.

*R.E. Burch
The Burch Group
Santa Ana, California*

Adrienne Gall's article, "You Can Take the Manager Out of the Woods, but . . .," was excellent. It is the *first* article on adventure training I've ever read that gives a very realistic, truthful picture of what is possible in our courses *as well as* what is needed to achieve these possibilities. Thanks!

*Susan St. John-Rheault
Hurricane Island Outward Bound
Rockland, Maine*

The articles on adventure training are very well done—the best I've seen on the subject. Already, I've had a relative flood of inquiries resulting from the articles—a dozen or so. You may have legitimized adventure training!

Thanks especially for your accuracy and dedication to discovering and reporting what really goes on in this area. Many other articles have missed what I think are the most important aspects. Good for you and your readership.

*Charles Conn
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Cambridge, Massachusetts*

Bah, Humbug!

In Patricia Galagan's profile, "Come to the Ranch and Play the Game," Larry Wilson talks about the "golden egg" as if such a thing doesn't exist. Certainly he knows better. Wilson Learning's success came from the excellent sales training programs they developed during the early years. Larry, that *was* your golden egg. Unfortunately, those programs haven't changed much since then to keep pace with the "changes" in selling.

Larry's golden egg today sounds like leftover and refried est. Yes, I agree changing is important. So is trust, empathy, understanding, etc. But why can't Wilson call it what it really is: Wilson World, an adventure park—and an expensive one—for spoiled grown-ups. Disneyworld is a learning experience too! Space Mountain scared me to death and the experience changed me forever. I'll never trust my wife again.

*Steve Nice
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The series on adventure learning was fascinating reading and reminded me of other fascinating readings I've encountered in the field of training. Those who have been in this field for some time will recall previous ideas that captured the minds of trainers, each for a short period of time. First it was courses in human relations. The pendulum then swung in the other direction: We fell in love with the systems approach to training and developed programmed instruction. "Progress" then took us to sensitivity training. Other fascinating approaches filled our magazines, such as *est*. Then the *est* craze was overshadowed by quality circle concepts.

Of course, other minor excitements have held our attention between these major—and now forgotten—developments. All of them, major and minor, failed due to lack of relevancy. Now adventure learning is making the news, but it looks as though this trend has the same basic flaw as the rest: relevancy. Janet Long's article "The Wilderness Lab Comes of Age" says that Adventure Learning is "graphic, unfamiliar," and "fun, bordering on silly." In the real world, however, learning is not graphic; most behaviors are familiar and tasks are not fun but border on serious.

The main rationale of adventure learning is that "one learns by doing." This is true and is the only concept we really know about learning. But this axiom is incomplete. It should read: "We learn by doing *that* which we are doing." Accordingly, because the activities described in Patricia Galagan's article, "Between Two Trapezes," become so outrageously different from the real world, the learning transfer can't take place in the job environment.

I, for one, wish that this missing link were not true. Then we could all go to exciting learning places such as the Pecos River Ranch and experience graphically unfamiliar, bordering on silly fun, and come back and be able to implement needed changes successfully in our respective organizations!

We trainers must realize that the major skill we need to develop is the ability to analyze the real problems of the workplace. If the problems are caused by human performance, then we can suggest actions that are part of the natural work environment in order to

assure that management will reinforce them. This process may not be as exciting as climbing a pole, but it has a better chance of producing the desired results.

Jack Asgar
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[Editor's note: *It seems that you didn't read the entire adventure learning series in the March issue. The third article, "You Can Take the Manager Out of the Woods, but . . .," was aimed at heading off many of the misgivings you express.*

It would be absurd to suggest a direct parallel exists between, say, climbing a mountain and concluding a major business deal. But what does translate back to the workplace are the behavioral competencies one acquires by trying and succeeding at an activity that once seemed impossible.

Responsible adventure learning providers, such as those listed at the end of the article, have staff who have been in the business world and understand organizational and management development processes. They are not attempting to sell a touchy-feely bill of goods; rather, they understand that organizations are made of people and that the way those people feel about themselves and interact with others has an effect on business.

It is also important to remember that what an individual learns from an outdoor experience is entirely up to that person. Rather than force participants to accept some kind of psychological doctrine, adventure learning activities require that individuals only do what they feel comfortable doing. Pressure is viewed as a negative force.

Certainly trainers must help people "analyze the real problems of the workplace." But people can't do that if there are barriers prohibiting them from seeing those problems clearly. Adventure learning has had great success in breaking down those barriers. Sure, it's not for everyone. But nothing is.—A.L.G.]

Beware of Sand Merchants Disguised as Palm Trees

In Rick Behring's article, "A Caravan of One" (March 1987), I enthusiastically applauded the author's premise that just one imaginative, talented, and motivated HRD professional can make a difference. When I was working in a large bureaucracy, my one-person training department was indicative of the amount of support in-house HRD was receiving from top management. In this type of setting, one may have to deal not only with apathetic managers, but also with personal critics, competitors, or others who would like to see HRD fail (i.e., the Sand Merchants). So it is best to be aware of the other side of the oasis, because even Behring's watering hole has the potential to turn into a liquid grave.

Beware that while you are reassuring yourself that "what you do has merit and is worthwhile," critics may be reacting differently: "Why is this trainer trying so hard?" "I never had training, and look at me!" "I had enough training 20 years ago." "Nothing changes here, so training is not necessary."

They may also be suspicious if you "take advantage of resources outside the building": "That trainer is bringing in cronies to help." "We don't want outsiders interfering." "Why would outsiders help our company? There's something fishy here."

Even some of the professional development time that Behring suggests—"time spent reading books and journals"—can be suspect: "What is this ASTD garbage?" "This is not a public library." "Why is that trainer reading instead of working?"

Sand Merchants also won't hold for HR practitioners to "practice what we preach." They complain instead: "I'm tired of hearing about lifelong learning." "That trainer is wasting her time studying for a doctorate. We don't need that level of sophistication here."

Even with an abundance of Sand Merchants to deal with, I succeeded in establishing an impressive and highly acclaimed core of over 50 training programs. I guess it helps to be part camel!

Dorothy Nimal
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Tell Us What You Think

The current concern for workplace drug testing may be the first of many controversies over Big Brother's role in the business world. The *Washington Post* reported in January that USG Corp. told its employees that cigarette smokers will be fired if they don't quit. Does business have the right to enforce this sort of discipline? Where will the lines be drawn? We'd like to hear your opinions. Send your viewpoints to "Issues," *Training & Development Journal*, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.



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