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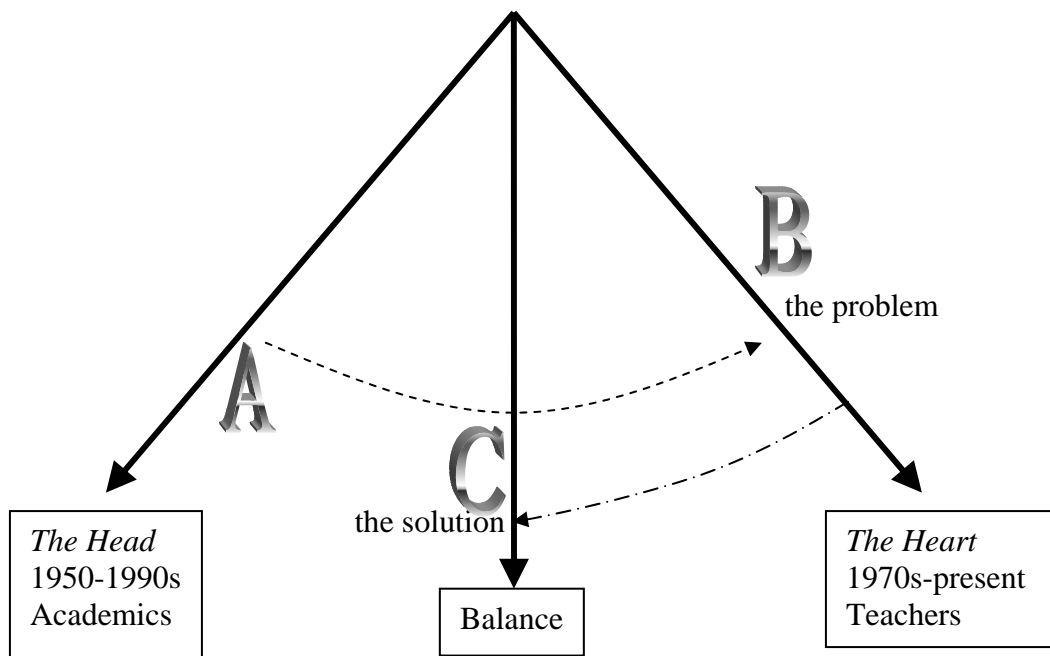
10 Reasons We Dread Team- building

By Ron Koller

Teambuilding is a very misunderstood topic. Clearly, very few people, if any, like teambuilding anymore. Why? Because a radical segment of HR, training and consulting types have ruined it. They're transformed what was once a good practice of team performance improvement and ruined it.

How? Well, let's just say that there is a "heart" component and "head" component to teams. For years, the heart was often the low priority if not totally ignored. The 1950s was an era where repressed "feelings" were rampant in American business. Everything was all logic and no heart. Today, the reverse is true of teambuilding. It is all heart and little to no head. The problem with teambuilding today can be captured in one quote:

“Oprah has hijacked Teambuilding”



The 10 Reasons we Dread Teambuilding

1. Everyone has had a bad teambuilding experience
2. DIY doesn't work for teambuilding
3. Political correctness and saving face now trump honesty
4. Agenda driven mentality
5. It often turns into bitch session
6. Where's the beef? Too much fluff
7. Kindergarten anyone?
8. We're just spinning our wheels, nothing good comes from it
9. Keep doing what you're doing and you'll keep getting what you're getting
10. It exposes everyone's worst fear – human skill ineptness

“Oprah has hijacked teambuilding

... but we're taking it back!”

Reason #1 – Everyone has had a bad teambuilding experience

If you ask anyone who has worked in organizations for more than 5 years, “have you ever had a bad experience doing teambuilding?” you’ll get a resounding “yes” as an answer. Or, as of late, you may get, “I’ve never been to a teambuilding session.”

Let’s just do free association ... when you hear the word “teambuilding” what comes to mind?

Let’s start with the Pollyanna terms, “fun, activities, games, spirit, etc.” Then we move on to cynicism, “fluff, flakes, etc.”

So, which list is true? I would argue that both lists are a train wreck and are symptomatic of how low teambuilding has gone. The ideal answer would be “working out real issues, progress, etc.”

If you’re not there yet, don’t despair. The purpose of this web site is to help take back teambuilding. But before we can do that, let’s go deeper into the pain.

I did a Google on teambuilding. Here is the picture that comes up on the 1st website:



What words come to mind as you look at this picture? Dare I say the words from Pollyanna above? If these people ever worm their way into your organization, *grab your wallet and run.*

It’s like a bad element moving into your house and taking it over. We’ll ... we’re here to take it back. We all know that most teams are screwed up and need help. Unfortunately, the “help” that’s currently available is more painful than the pain of being a screwed up team.

Help isn’t supposed to be painful. We’ve stripped teambuilding, as it has become, of all the glitz, glamour and touchy-feely bull shit. We’ve stripped it down to it’s original finish.

What is the standard for teambuilding? What is good teambuilding? What is bad teambuilding? Have you experienced good teambuilding? Have you experienced bad teambuilding?

These are all questions that we will help you find the answers to.

Reason #2 – DIY doesn't work for teambuilding

Teambuilding has gotten so bad that we've decided not to call in the experts for help anymore. Unfortunately, our team's problems have not gone away. So, what do we do?

A lot of leaders have decided to take up the cause themselves. What a disaster! That's the equivalent having a couple trying to work out their marital differences on their own. Anyone who is married knows how impossible that cause is. And yet, that is what a lot of leaders are doing. I can't say I blame them. If I had to choose between calling in the "kindergarten crew inc." or doing it myself, I think I'd take my chances on doing it myself. Unfortunately, that stirs up a whole new set of problems.

Imagine if Discovery Health teamed up with the Do It Yourself (DIY) Network. You could have a whole channel devoted to what might be ailing you, with the medical procedures you could do to yourself to solve your health problems. Sounds ridiculous right? Don't tell that to Doctor Evan O'Neil Kane.



In 1921, this pioneer was trying to prove to the world that local anesthetic was safer to use than ether. Because it was difficult in those days to get someone to volunteer for such a medical experiment, Dr. Kane performed the first appendectomy using only a local anesthetic – *on himself!* (citation)

“In October 1999 Dr Jerri Neilsen was trapped at the South Pole when she discovered she had breast cancer. She performed needle biopsies on her own breast, conducted her own intravenous chemotherapy treatments and was preparing to perform self-surgery on her affected breast in the event that she could not be rescued. Weather eventually permitted her rescue but only after weeks of enduring self-inflicted invasive treatments which ultimately saved her life.” (citation)

Both of these anecdotes illustrate just how ridiculous it is to perform surgery on ourselves. Though not as ridiculous, trying to do teambuilding on our own is more often than not a futile effort.

Reason #3 – Political correctness and saving face now trump honesty

The hallmark truth underlying all teams is that trust needs to be present for the team to perform well. How do we build trust? That is a great question that could take a whole book to answer. We'll just break it down to one important characteristic – honesty. Everyone can agree that honesty is an important factor when building trust. Unfortunately, what we've seen in organizations for years is that honesty has taken a back seat to political correctness and saving face.

We've all heard the notion of telling someone what they want to hear versus telling them the cold hard truth of the matter. With the pendulum swinging away from the head to the heart, honesty is a victim of this swing. Instead of being truthful, we curb what we say so as not to offend. Again, one can be overly insensitive. There can be a balance between being insensitive (as was the case from the beginning of organizations till today in some places) and being overly sensitive (which is the case in most organizations today).

What you believe about this depends on where you work. I've worked (even today in 2006) in places where the Bobby Knight persona still rules with an iron fist. Walk into any big 3 automotive manufacturing facility and you'll find this the case. Too much Bobby Knight is what prompted the swing in the head-heart pendulum in the first place.

However, replacing Bobby Knight with Oprah solves one problem only to open up a whole new set of problems. Actually, I'm getting a little ahead of myself. There is a persona in between Bobby Knight and Oprah that exists in most companies today. They are the "in the closet" Bobby Knights. By "in the closet" I mean that they think the same way that Bobby Knight thinks, but they keep most of the thoughts to themselves. The dad from Everybody Loves Raymond personifies this persona. He's quiet, doesn't (intentionally) offend strangers, and he's an emotional idiot. Think of this persona as an introverted Bobby Knight.



Though these types are not nearly as abrasive as the Bobby Knights, they repress feelings and operate on pure logic. They are in hiding now because it is no longer fashionable to act in a "command and control" way in most organizations. So, they do command and control "in the closet." We've seemingly become a culture where we do a great job pointing the finger about others, then talk real nice when they're eye to eye.

Lastly, we have the Oprah's. Rightfully so, these leaders have accurately diagnosed the lack of supportive (heart) behavior in organizations. Unfortunately, they have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Many completely abandon logic in pursuit of emotional fulfillment.

Reason #4 – Agenda driven mentality

A meeting without a purpose is like a ship without a rudder.

“Here is today’s agenda.” Yuck. We’ve heard it a hundred times. Too bad the egomaniac that created it has a Napoleon complex and thinks that somehow they’re title as team leader means that they are smarter than everyone in the group.



They stroll in and handout a sheet which dictates what everyone will talk about today. By handing it out, of course, they fail to see that it is still the behavior of a dictator.

If there happens to be problems with team performance, the boss says we need to talk about it.

Two things happen:

- #1 people tell the boss what they want to hear and avoid conflict at all costs
- #2 people talk and talk and talk and talk ... and nothing ever really gets done.

More often than not, the right people that need to be in the room to get the team on track are not present.

A classic example of this happened at a high school in the town where I first lived. They were experiencing increases in things like threats which were predecessors to violent acts. In the post-Columbine era, they had an open forum. Speaker after speaker preached the importance of parenting teens the right way in homes.

In a nutshell, they were lecturing the “good” parents who volunteered their time at night to come to the forum on the virtues of being a good parent. When in reality, the parents that needed to hear this obviously do not attend these voluntary forums. BUT, they had a GREAT agenda!

There are actually 4 design criteria for a good teambuilding session:

1. We have discussions about the real issues (the cold, uncomfortable truth)
2. It is entertaining (we don’t throw out the baby with the bath water)
3. It is not something that is done to us, we are apart of doing
4. Incentives and disincentives are in place for action when it’s over

For years, HR folks, training and development types have walked on egg shells with #1, over-focused on #2, been oblivious to #3 because of their egos & avoided #4 because they mistakenly think that power in organizations is inherently evil.

Balancing these 4 criteria ensure that people don’t get together for a mental masturbation session.

Reason #5 – It often turns into a bitch session

My wife is a nurse. At one of her old jobs, they hired a consulting firm to reengineer their processes. As part of the process, the nurse manager was required to get the input from the staff every few months. My wife would tell me how she dreaded going to these sessions. They were a bunch of bullshit. All everyone did was bitch and moan about this and that. Everyone tried as hard as they could to work their individual agendas that had nothing to do with everyone else's problems.

That is what happens when “me” takes precedence over “we.” Unfortunately, the nurse manager did not understand the power of harnessing this dissatisfaction and turning it into productive actions. Instead, they just met every few months and nothing changed. Millions of dollars later, the consulting firm was asked to leave and the staff was told to go back to doing things the old way. Millions of dollars of investments down the drain.

The first prerequisite to real change is a shared sense of dissatisfaction. Without it, there is no reason for me to get involved. If what you are doing does not solve my problem, odds are I will not care about it too much. When you know and will do something about what bothers me, and when I know and will do something about what is bothering you, only then can real change have a chance at happening.



Where do we draw the line between dissatisfaction and whining and insubordination? Again, the odds are stacked against us. Depending on the individual manager, an employee's statement could be considered dissatisfaction, whining or insubordination. It is a very objective process.

Most, but not all, of aimless “input” sessions dissolve into bitch sessions. Leadership's reaction (and rightfully so) is to avoid getting any further input. Who wants to hear everyone's complaints over and over and over again. Unfortunately, leaders fail to see that the real culprit is not the employees, but rather the questions that employees are asked to share their input. If it is a DIY place, it is the managers fault. If it is a place where HR handles it, it is their fault. Or, it is a combination of the two.

There has to be a “so what?” component to the dissatisfaction for it to be productive.

Reason #6 – Where’s the beef? (Too much fluff)

So, we’ve established that to be an effective teambuilding session, we need to get the real issues out on the table. This can be difficult in the political correct era we are living in, on the one hand. On the other hand, as demonstrated in Reason #5, getting the real issues on the table doesn’t always guarantee a successful session. This takes a skilled facilitator to do this. Almost no leaders or team members are able to do this. Most outside facilitators are as well incompetent at doing this because they fear conflict.

And so, the story goes, if you’re afraid of conflict, you gravitate towards glitz and glamour. You get the reputation as the “feel good” person that everybody loves to see. And people love these types. If you’re not going to actually help us collectively, at least make us feel good about ourselves individually.



The picture here is an actual teambuilding session. I feel sorry for the people enduring it. Not that they had a bad time. I’m sure they all had a good time. But how much did it actually help the team? Did they all go back to work and stop playing politics and stop pushing each other’s buttons. I don’t think so.

And to those Oprah lovers who have hijacked teambuilding, I say, “**where’s the beef?**” This very popular Wendy’s commercial from the 80s demonstrates to a tee the problem with Oprah-centric or feel good teambuilding ... there is so much touchy-feely and not enough substance!



If you ever run into somebody who says they can help your team at work by getting them to do a session at an amusement park, grab your wallet and run.

Take note: do not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Sessions that are completely boring (see my video called Death By Powerpoint) are equally problematic. You need to strike a balance between getting the truth on the table, but also making sure that people get some enjoyment out of the process as well.

This brings us to our next point. Who are you (or anybody for that matter) to decide what and how the team needs to get the truth on the table. What is enjoyment to them? What is enjoyable for one team is pain for another. Stop deciding everything for the team and let them decide some things for themselves!

Reason #7 – Kindergarten anyone?



Leave the past in the past. There is no such thing as a “classroom” in corporate America. If you hear someone say it, grab your wallet and run the other way. They assume that the only way that someone learns is if there is someone there to teach. Think about it, how much of what you learn comes from:

- a) Experience (learning by doing)
- b) Asking (learning from co-workers)
- c) Reading (learning from books, magazines, etc)
- d) Teaching (learning from trainers)

The training world would have you believe that the correct answer is d) and that the percentage is 99%. That way, they’ll get more business. The truth is that a), b) & c) out number d) in the real world, probably by a 10 to 1 margin. The underlying message here is that “I know, you don’t. I’m up here because I’m smart about teams and you’re not.” The premise is total bullshit, and yet it drives almost all corporate teambuilding (and training, but that’s a whole ‘nother website).

When my daughter was 2 ½ years old, she went through the “look at me” phase. Everything was about her. She wanted the spotlight on herself constantly and craved to be the center of attention. Unfortunately, most of today’s corporate trainers are adults who never grew out of their child-phase of life. And we get stuck with them.

Their sessions are all about themselves. They strive to be the organizational equivalent of Oprah with the camera/spotlight always on them. They bask in the glory of being the team “expert.” They spend hours memorizing their material and spend most of the so-called teambuilding session talking and talking and talking.

When they are not talking, they are having the group engage in some mindless game that has absolutely nothing to do with the group’s work, though they spend lots of time drawing the parallels. Let me tell you something. If they have to spend time connecting the dots for you, it was probably not the right thing for your team. But what do they care? They see their role as corporate kindergarten teacher who is there to part entertain and part educate. Yuck!

The unfortunate part about their approach is that it turns people off to teambuilding. A good teambuilding session is about the team, and NOT about the person facilitating it. When you put the team as the center and shine the spotlight on the team, you are engaged in what we call *participant-centered* work. When you’re listening to some flake entertaining you for hours on end, you are being duped by a person doing *self-centered* work. And it is not that they are bad people, either. They are just confused. They, themselves, were educated by educators that taught them that they need to be the center of attention. That think it is their duty. What a shame.



Reason #8 – We’re just spinning our wheels, nothing good comes from it

The Pollyanna corporate training and development types hate accountability – it’s so mean (or so they think). They avoid it like the plague. And, of course, it works out just fine for them – nobody ever gets uncomfortable, and yet nothing ever gets accomplished so we need to call them back for more (billable) help.

Years ago, a group of organizational effectiveness folks in the UK (Socio-technical systems practitioners) broke it down like this: success at work depends on two mutually dependant systems ... the technical system and the social system. This is a simple, yet profound discovery. Our jobs are seemingly all about the “technical” part of this equation. We check our email, we perform tasks to achieve our goals, etc. And yet, it is the “social” part of the equation that is mostly responsible for our **success** or **failure**.

When there are technical problems, we are more than able and get right to the root of the problem and solve it quickly. When it is a social problem, on the other hand, all bets are off. One person generally cannot effectively solve the problems involving human skills (that doesn’t stop some superheroes from trying). Instead, managers avoid, ignore or handle these problems on the path to least resistance.

We’ve become pretty good at low people skill behavior because there is no punishment for it. The workplace is filled with childish conversations of duplicity, he-said she-said, passive-aggressiveness, etc.

Appearing to be technically competent seems to be the #1 goal of those rising through the ranks of the organizations. The appearance of being more socially skilled can hamper one’s political ambitions. One cannot be labeled a Dr. Phil and rise to the top of an organization. The Bill Gates (emotionally stupid) of the organizations rise a lot faster because of their technical competence.

What does all this mean for teambuilding? Well, we live in a world that creates an environment that would rather play childish political games to “beat” out someone else for a job vs. being the adult and doing the right thing. Being the adult doesn’t grab many headlines. Another thing is that working on people problems is exhausting. Anger, irritation and other unpleasant emotions are put front and center to be dealt with. Going with the path to least resistance theorem, it is NOT easy to do this.

The biggest problem here is that we provide incentives for technical development and no incentives (or disincentives) for people skills. I do know of one forward thinking automotive supplier who fired a plant manager during a launch (day 9) for Bobby Knight behavior. What message do you think that sent to the rest of management and the workforce?

Reason #9 – Keep doing what you’re doing and you’ll keep getting what you’re getting

Reason #1 was that everyone has had a bad teambuilding experience. And so it goes, it we continue to use the same process that resulted in a bad experience, people will avoid the process. And I don’t mean have someone come in and do “Oprah” differently than you’re doing it now.

We once did a team development session with a group in the homebuilding industry in the field office. At the lunch break, the team asked, “so how are we doing?” I knew what they were asking me. That company has a subdivision of the year award every year for the best team. They wanted to know if they had the right stuff. My answer was that “everyone was polite and there was no conflicts ... impossible for such an operation.”

They came back to me a few minutes later and asked if they could do the afternoon portion of the session at the local Bahama Breeze restaurant. With the team leader saying sure, I figured it couldn’t hurt.



We sat around the gazebo that has the giant fireplace in it. It is one giant round table. We did a “re-check-in” and kept going. What the team and I noticed was that there was a different feel in the room. People were starting to speak up and say what they really thought instead of the polite, politically correct conversation they had had in the morning.



Too many bosses get the idea that if we can get the team into the conference room, that should be good enough. The problems with that, as we all know, is that it does not remove us from the “work” environment. Our attention is distracted. We’re going to our desk first, then focusing on two things at the same time. When we at work, we can’t help but focus on work. We get into the same groove (or rut) of everyday work life. That’s normal.

The message here is that you need to send a clear message that you want to improve team performance without doing a group hug. You don’t do this by **telling** the team that you are going to do this. You do this by **asking** them what do we need to have conversations about in order to improve our team’s performance. Everything they say is not gospel, but at least you better know where they stand.

Reason #10 – It exposes everyone’s worst fear – human skill ineptness

Douglas McGregor said that “everyone thinks they’re good at people skills.” That’s a problem. “It couldn’t be me, I’m not the problem,” is in everyone’s mind, including my own. But it is a fantasy.

Xxx poll revealed that the #1 complaint workers have with their bosses is poor communication. That can mean many, many things. Bosses with poor communication skills or habits are the reason for the 10th reason we dread teambuilding: to much mystery. Some of the work we do could be put on television, with the plots, sub-plots, actors, etc.

The unfortunate reality is that most managers do not do a good job of communicating. Most do a poor job because of their underlying belief that the workplace is patriarchal. That is a fancy way of saying, “I’m important and I need to know; you’re all not that important and you don’t need to know.” They are just clueless. And yet, this is the norm.



Whenever any outsider (consultant, trainer, etc.) comes into an organization, the awareness or understanding of what they are and why they are there is limited at best. We’ve all been there. Who are “those” people and why are they here? In the absence of good communication, the rumor mill starts to grind and spin.

So let’s take this to the teambuilding realm. You’re part of the team. You hear that the team is going to do some teambuilding. Regardless of whether or not you’ve had good or bad experiences with teambuilding, you still know that the team could use a shot of something to improve. Unfortunately, you know nothing more than “the team is going to do some teambuilding.” It is a rarity in our business that we see an organization do a good job reducing the mystery of who we are, why we’re there and what we’ll be doing.



And so, we do the best job we can making sure that everyone knows who we are and what we’re up to. Making our presence transparent is something that helps the team members be more comfortable with the process and thereby enable them to participate in a more natural way.

Nobody hops out of bed in the morning and thinks, “yes, I’m going to a teambuilding session at work today.” Well, I should say nobody that’s been kept in the dark about what that session is all about. We have found that if you involve people in the process and make sure the team knows what’s going to happen, you end up having people look forward to the session. Why? An informed team member will see that this teambuilding session might be different ... might be an venue where one can vent their frustrations and get some solutions to their problems.

Conclusion

Our intent here was not to cover all the bases. We hoped to help you see that teambuilding has been hijacked, but that it is possible (and easy) to take it back over. You just need to get people involved who dislike teambuilding as it currently stands.

There are plenty of people out there that do not like teambuilding that could divert that energy into constructively changing it rather than destructively avoiding it.

I know I'm not alone. There are plenty of you out there that believe the same things as I do. If you share in these criticisms (or see others that I've missed), please drop us a line. We'll be updating this article periodically and would love to include your anecdotes.

Good luck and overcome the Oprahs and the Bobby Knights (both in the closet and out)!