

By Marci Pelzer

The times that bind

Team-building events key in virtual workplace

The group effectiveness issues that accompany virtual offices and globalization have led to cries of “On belay” from local workers used to communicating online lately.

“We’re beginning to lose some of that face-to-face credibility and the ability to connect,” says Mary Wacker, an organizational development consultant who plans team-building retreats with outdoor adventure elements. “It’s harder to build relationships when you’re e-mailing.”

Of the 10 to 12 team-building projects Wacker organizes annually, many include ropes courses and experiential learning activities. Advocates say retreats built around adventures build trust and recognition among co-workers.

“It tends to break down barriers and level the playing field,” Wacker says.

Rochelle Behling, program manager for the Center for Organizational Advancement at Rogers Memorial Hospital, estimates that participation in the hospital’s one-day team building retreats — which feature an outdoor ropes course and an indoor rock climbing wall — has grown by 10 percent annually since 1988.

Wacker customizes retreats depending upon client needs. Her typical programs include a style assessment such as the Myers Briggs personality test, activities that identify team stages, group problem solving sessions, and structured individual and group feedback.

Rogers Memorial offers three tracks: networking for new teams, enrichment for existing teams and intervention programs that focus on one specific issue for an established team. Retreats at Rogers Memorial run \$1,620 for a 12-member group and \$135 for each additional member. The full-day sessions include breakfast and lunch.

The Milwaukee Public Schools has operated an internal team-building program on a 50-acre site adjacent to Whitnall Park since 1995, according to



Dave Braby, coordinator for the district’s Ropes and Challenges program. Although serving the student and staff needs for 150 schools is Braby’s highest priority, he hopes to soon

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offer programs and retreats to corporate groups.

“We’re close to building a facility, which will give us a lot more flexibility,” Braby says. The MPS course is unique because all elements are accessible to people with disabilities.

The American Club in Kohler developed “Team Cuisine” in 1997 to bond co-workers and address workplace issues through cooking adventures, according to Greg Koehler, manager of the Kohler Team Challenge Program. Organizers can choose among programs designed to improve productivity, communication problem solving and leadership development.

Team programs range from an Iron Chef-like project where teams are given ingredients but no recipes to the reverse, where they are given a gourmet recipe and little else. Organizers may surprise teams mid-dish by asking them to drop their recipe and take over a project started by another team.

All teams are critiqued for their social interaction, and all dishes are judged by American Club chefs for color, taste, texture and presentation. Participants are rewarded with a meal or snack of their intended dish, cooked the proper way. The winners get chocolate medals, "beanie" chefs and soft-cover cookbooks from the American Club.

Team Cuisine programs range from \$60 per person for a two-hour program that produces an appetizer and better communication to \$125 for a full-day workshop with a timed cooking contest and an organized leadership discussion.

Carole Unis, director of marketing for the Wisconsin Health Information Network, is a team building veteran and advocate. She says communication among her colleagues, who spend a lot of time out of the office, improved after a retreat Wacker organized last year.

"It brought out personality strengths and strengths in people that we did not see before, and it motivated me to do an even better job," she says.

Beth Walsh, vice president of finance and administration for Kettle Creek Homes, organized a Team Cuisine retreat at the American Club for last February where managers made tiramisu and apple tart alongside the company's owners.

"People are still talking about it," she says. "People wore chef hats. We looked silly and got messy. It was a good time."

But team building organizers caution that retreats should be planned with care.

Behling warns that the goals and objectives of a team-building adventure should be carefully communicated, as not to threaten employees.

"People think they're coming out here to get fixed and that's not the case."

She also advises organizers to think ahead about how to simulate and continue the benefits of team-building once the team is back in the office.

Wacker cautions potential clients that outside consultants and team-building activities can't resolve individual performance issues.

"Without specific feedback and coaching, performance issues tend not to solve themselves," she says.



Marv Wacker