



SkillSharpener Web Extra

Build team-building into your service routine

Team-building activities are an excellent way to boost morale and improve productivity, but the manager has to be closely involved to make sure that activities are focused on pertinent issues and that there is discussion and follow-up on those issues.

Working regular team-building activities into your staff development and training routine can be very valuable, says Brian Cole Miller, author of *More Quick Team-Building Activities for Busy Managers*.

There are synergies to be had when people are working together and pulling in the same direction rather than simply working side by side.

“And from a truly bottom-line standpoint, the results are better, profits are better,” Miller says, “and turnover is reduced when people are working as a team because they just plain like it better — like their boss, like the people that they work with, and think that their company is a great place to work.”

The same thing applies to team-building in the customer service department — which can often use help with issues like turnover and staff morale.

“When people are dealing with customers and they have to rely on their team members either to support them or to help those customers, the

whole process works much better when they feel like a team,” says Miller.

The challenge with customer service departments or call centers, no matter how large or how small, is that it is often difficult to get everyone from the team off the phones at the same time. Miller suggests keeping your team-building activities short, so that you can take 15-minutes out of your regular weekly staff meeting for team-building, or add a few team-building activities to other events which take reps away from the phones.

One of the important roles of the manager in this process is to select the right activities for the team. And the right activity has less to do with the type or size of the team or the industry you are in than with the specific team-performance issues you want to address — issues like cooperation, communication, creative thinking, and others, says Miller. For instance, an activity like “The Buttermilk Line” (see box on next page) is often used to promote cooperation, communication, and to get a team beyond thinking in terms of black and white.



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But beyond the ostensible goals of the activity, the manager can use team-building activities as diagnostic tools to observe how their team interacts in general terms. For instance, with “The Buttermilk Line,” says Miller, “where people have to line up according to how much they like buttermilk, the fun thing is that probably half the people on your team have never even tasted it and there will be a few who love it or who want to tell stories about how their mother first made them try it. But don’t listen to those stories. Instead, what you want to watch is how one team member is furrowing her brow, or look at the way she snapped at another team member and how he hasn’t spoken again since. My experience in 20 years of doing this tells me that’s also how they behave at work. So to use it as a diagnostic tool, you want to sit back and watch, stay out of the content, and notice the patterns you see in terms of behavior.”

www.workingsolutionsonline.com.
More Quick Team-Building Activities for Busy Managers is published by Amacom, *www.amacombooks.com.*

Building cooperation with buttermilk

“The Buttermilk Line” is a simple teambuilding activity meant to teach participants about how to deal with issues that are not strictly black and white — that include shades of gray. In it, participants are asked to line themselves up in order of how much they enjoy the taste of buttermilk.

Brian Cole Miller, author of *More Quick Team-Building Activities for Busy Managers*, suggests that managers use this exercise when a group gets caught up in black and white thinking, when it has trouble wrestling with and resolving issues that don’t have a clear-cut or easy solution, or when it gets caught up in thinking there is only one answer to any situation.

Here are the steps:

- Gather the group in one location with plenty of room to spread out.
- Tell the group to arrange themselves in one line, single file.
- Instruct them that the person in the group who loves buttermilk the most should be on one end of the line, and the person who hates it the most should be at the other end.
- The rest of the participants need to arrange themselves according to their like/dislike of buttermilk in relationship to the two extremes.

“Once you’ve described the task, keep quiet,” says Miller. “Don’t offer tips to help get the group started or past a sticking point.” Don’t accept ties, he adds, and remind the group that the line is to be single file. The manager should simply observe the process and note how the group resolves questions when things are not clear.

When the group has completed the activity, Miller suggests you pose the following questions to stimulate discussion:

- How did the two end spots get filled?
- Which slots were easiest to fill, and why?
- Which slots were most difficult to fill, and why?
- How did you feel when someone pressed you to take a spot in line?
- How did you feel when participants were reluctant to commit to a place in line?
- Which situations or decisions back on the job resemble this one?
- How can we apply what we learned today to that situation or decision?



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