

## Hating the tough love

Staffers can opt out of morale-building tasks

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Corporate retreats featuring competitive team-building activities are all the rage, but not everyone feels built up by the experience.

For many New Yorkers — overweight or featherweight, uncoordinated or unathletic, or just plain uncomfortable — these outings do little more than bring back bad memories of gym class. Some people simply don't want to see their boss in shorts, or get intimate with co-workers.

Tracey Zeeck went on a team-building retreat for her job at the United Way, and one of the first activities was a "trust fall," in which one person falls back off a ledge into the waiting arms of the rest of the team.

"I shot through their hands like a greased pig, landing with a thud onto the hard, red earth," Ms. Zeeck says. When a co-worker went up for his turn, Ms. Zeeck recalls, she was the only person who really tried to catch him. "I was once again lying on the ground, this time with a 200-pound man on top of me," she says. She never learned to trust the members of her team.

Ms. Zeeck, now in her 30s, has since left the United Way, but the experience still haunts her. When her current employer asked her recently to participate in a tree-climbing field day, she respectfully declined. "I don't think I'd be willing to do this with co-workers ever," she says.

### Inspired by reality shows

Activity-based team-building programs are becoming more popular. The success of reality-based television shows such as *The Apprentice*, *Survivor* and *The Weakest Link* has contributed to the belief among companies that retreats are a good way to build morale.

"I'm seeing more and more firms opt to spend a day or more outside the office, because the workplace has become such a pressure cooker," says Ed Tilley, president of El Cerrito, Calif.-based Adventure Associates Inc., which runs team-building programs for Accenture, General Electric Co., PricewaterhouseCoopers, Time Warner Inc. and other firms.

But for some employees, the retreats only add a new series of pressures on top of those they face at work. One of the most common icebreaker challenges involves transporting team members from point A to point B, often through a rope "spider web" or over a bar in a kind of reverse limbo.

It's supposed to foster teamwork and problem-solving. Fun for some people — a nightmare for others.

"We were in beautiful upstate New York, and the first day we had to figure out how to pass each member of the group over a rope without touching it," says Donna Flagg, a former account executive at a big Manhattan-based cosmetics company. There were a couple of overweight employees in the group. "They were horrified," she says.

One of the heavier participants — a senior manager — disappeared for the rest of the day.

Another task involved balancing on cinderblocks and performing an on-stage karaoke routine. Ms. Flagg was in her 20s and new at the company. She had a background as a dancer. She remembers thinking: "I don't want to look like a dancer. I'm not working here as a dancer."

Nor did she want to show up any of her bosses, so she tried to play down her abilities.

Ms. Flagg eventually quit the job. But her frustration with the experience spurred her to start her own company, Manhattan-based The Krysalis Group, which specializes in team-building. She was determined to do it right. "None of those skills we learned at those retreats are relevant back at work," she says.

Not everyone is haunted by a harrowing experience. Some people are just naturally skeptical of such rah-rah team activities.

"I'm not a competitive person," says Joan Burns, a self-described fiftysomething senior director of administration for law firm Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal.

She had to give herself a pep talk last summer before participating in her first team-building retreat with the firm. She ended up enjoying it so much, she's looking forward to this year's retreat. Challenges included a range of activities — a water-balloon toss, synchronized walking, a pie-eating contest and even birthday cake decorating.

"Not every person is competitive in everything," says Ms. Burns, "and you were never alone in a task."

### **Fear and loathing**

Still, for the reluctant, there are countless reasons to view these programs with a mix of fear and loathing. The irrepressible can-do attitude of many retreat leaders is one of them.

"If you're uncomfortable, that almost always means that you're growing and learning," says Joe Takash, president of Chicago-based Victory Consulting. "You have to go through that period of pain to get to the other side." That may work for the varsity team, but not necessarily for the office IT manager.

This type of tough-love coaching is not uncommon in the industry. "The facilitator can usually see the individual out in the weeds who doesn't want to participate," says Bill Morin, president of Manhattan-based consulting firm WJM Associates Inc., which runs the Montana Leadership Institute.

Mr. Morin says it's sometimes necessary to "excommunicate the person," so the rest of the group can benefit from the activity. He finds that the malcontent usually "gets with it" once the group moves on without him.

"There's a certain amount of peer pressure and acceptance," Mr. Morin says. "They realize what's at stake. They think, 'The company is spending money on me for this; I better show up.'"

Of course, such group-pressure tactics may get people to play along, but critics ask, to what end? Many team-building programs expose vulnerabilities, such as fear of heights or of singing in front of a group, that have no relevance in the workplace, says Ben Dattner, an organizational psychologist and adjunct professor at New York University.

"Can you think of a darker circle of hell than having to listen to your co-workers do karaoke?" he asks.

## **SURVIVOR!**

### **Strategies for handling a retreat**

Research what activities will be involved.

"It is absolutely reasonable to ask what types of games or physically demanding tasks will be in the program."

— Deborah Navins, *director of special events at Chelsea Piers*

If you don't feel comfortable participating in a task, talk to the facilitator privately. Don't go to your company organizer.

"If you don't feel well, you don't feel well; nobody needs to know why. You can just say, 'It's personal.' Facilitators know what to do in those situations."

— Donna Flagg, *president of The Krysalis Group*

If you're not going to participate in a task, make sure to be an enthusiastic supporter of the team and contribute to the decision-making process.

"Groups have to have someone to lead and someone to follow. These programs are not about finding the weakest link and eliminating him or her."

— Ed Tilley, *president of Adventure Associates Inc.*

## **ALWAYS A KICK**

The staff roster of New York-based Major League Soccer is full of people who were high school, college and professional players. "But we also have some employees who never played soccer," says Human Resources Director Susie Goldsmith, who includes herself in that category.

Ms. Goldsmith's department organizes morale-boosting activities, which sometimes involve soccer tournaments. "We're a pretty athletic organization, but we do have employees who are a little nervous or apprehensive," she says. The company disperses inexperienced players evenly among the teams. "We also have a few employees who just come to watch and cheer, and that's fine too," she says. "It's a way to participate without playing."

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