

# Group Dynamics

By Sandra Hume

STAFF MEALS IN THE DINING ROOM ARE GREAT, BUT TO REALLY **BUILD A STRONG TEAM**, CONSIDER OFF-SITE, PLANNED EVENTS TO FOSTER TRUST, COOPERATION, AND FELLOWSHIP

**Penny Behling can tell** when a team doesn't work well together. As owner of Knoxville, TN-based Dynamic Dragon Boat Racing, which organizes teams from local businesses and organizations to participate in charity dragon-boat races, it's her job to make sure each 22-person group in the narrow, canoe-like boat knows what to do come race time. When the team isn't in sync, she says, "it's obvious from the moment they get in the boat. They paddle all over the place, and the boat will shimmy and shake." Which doesn't bode well for winning the race. But it doesn't bode well

for how the team works together off the water either.

How can you make your team paddle in unison so that your objectives are greeted with smooth sailing?

## **TEAM-BUILDING IS NEVER OVER**

Building a club's team is an ongoing pursuit, says Mark Bado, MCM, CCE, whose monograph on team-building was the culmination of two years of work. "Team-building starts as part of the hiring process and is constantly reinforced with the actions of the entire team." Beyond a new staff orientation





accompanied by a team-centric manual and a handshake from him, the general manager of the Kansas City Country Club recommends reinforcement methods like integrating the club's mission statement into all communication and meetings, treating all employees with consistency, providing honest feedback, and making biological sketches of the staff—including photos—accessible to the entire team.

### DIRECTION IS KEY ...

"Communication is the oil that keeps everything flowing," Bado says. "It was standard practice at one time for the pro shop, the restaurant, the grounds to all operate in their own little fiefdom without any solid communication. That's changed. If the parking lot is full because of an event, everyone from the pro shop to the grounds crew [should] know why."

The overall goal of a successful club, says Henry DeLozier, a consultant with Global Golf Advisors who works with golf-related businesses on goal-setting and team-building, is continuous improvement. That means communication should always be honest and straightforward. "A lot of managers confuse team-building with cheer-leading. But in this era of everyone on the team getting a trophy, compliments have to really mean something, and criticism has to be candid and constructive."

### ... BUT LISTEN, TOO

It also has to be heard. Andrew McMasters, artistic director at Jet City Improv in Se-



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attle, uses the principles of improvisational acting to help businesses hone their team-building skills. Improv helps people learn to listen, even when—and this is key—they don't think what they're hearing is valuable.

"A piece of feedback or suggestion on the job are what we call 'offers' in improv," McMasters says. When you get an offer, the rule is to accept it without question, and then build on it using a "Yes, and ..." response. So in improv, if someone says, "Look at that turtle," and you say, "Yes, and it has these great racing stripes," you have "accepted" their offer. "But if you say, 'No, it's a cat,' you've just blocked their offer"—which stops communication in its tracks.

DeLozier recalls a situation where the staff of a club's golf pro shop received feedback that they were standoffish and unfriendly. The staff thought that the criticism was

*The team that paddles together works well together, too.*

unfair; they said customers just didn't understand how the pro shop worked.

DeLozier made two suggestions. First, the staff should step out from behind the counter. Second, use a "yes" approach with every customer: even if the answer to a question is "no" ("No, we don't have that style of shoe in stock"), present it as "yes, but" ("yes, but it will take a week to order it"). The staff tried it—and the pro shop improved its customer service marks.

This kind of feedback doesn't have to come just from customers and clients, McMasters stresses. "Everyone has amazing ideas that can help your company" regardless of where they stand in the corporate hierarchy. "It's just a question of being able to hear them."

## Investing in Fun

Club managers are learning that team-building that brings results doesn't have to be complicated, or expensive—but it can be a heck of a lot of fun.

Dragon boat races are typically arranged as fundraisers to benefit a predetermined local charity, and range from \$1,000–\$2,500 for a 22-person team. Jet City Improv's corporate improv sessions start at about \$650 for a workshop tailored to 15 people.

When Bethesda Country Club in Bethesda, MD, sought to find low-cost ways to attract and

retain service people and keep them engaged, Director of Operations Peter Lovelace landed on a team-building outing that was so successful it's now a semiannual event: a day of paintball.

Lovelace loves the camaraderie paintball provides. "It's basically simulated warfare," he says. "You rely on people to cover you, you strategize—it's kind of the same thing as seeing 200 reservations on the book and figuring out how to leverage [your resources]." He especially likes seeing the roles different people take on, which

may be in direct opposition to their responsibilities at the club. "It's interesting to see how personalities might change in this type of environment."

Plus, Lovelace, says, the trips are relatively cost-effective. Between the club's valet company providing use of the bus and the chef sending along box lunches, a day of paintball costs the club only \$400. But the experience of a club director being systematically tracked and annihilated by a group of servers? Priceless. — S.H.



*The drummer on a dragon boat team sets the pace for paddlers and keeps the team in unison.*

### TRUST FALLS

In general, we don't trust people we don't know. One of the biggest benefits of organized team-building activities is that employees get to know one another, which in turn earns mutual trust, thus improving communication. Before getting involved in their company's dragon boating, people often didn't know the names of the coworkers they passed in the hall, Behling says. "After

they race together, they tell me, there's a totally different relationship with an energy that just wasn't there before."

Team-building experts prefer to tailor workshops to each group's personalized goals, but trust seems to always be at the core of goal lists. "You can't function without a certain degree of trust with your coworkers," says Ben Radley, whose corporate team-building workshops through Pleasant Hill Outdoor Camp in Perrysville, OH, use ropes-course-oriented activities to promote communication and trust. At the end, the training culminates in the ultimate test in trust: the zipline. "Ziplining is really a chance to put everything they've learned about communication and trust into practice," Radley says. "Everyone needs something different—some just want encouragement, while others need everyone to shut up while they face their fears. Team members really have to listen and be cognizant of others' needs."

### TEAM-BUILDING IN THE REAL WORLD

Done right, the value of your club's team-building can go beyond the theoretical. When it came time to prepare Kansas City Country Club's 2009 budget after the recession had settled in, Bado and his management team evaluated what was most important. "We wanted to be proactive, without decisions being made for us, and we wanted to be as transparent to the board as possible." The team concluded that professional development was their first priority, so together they decided to defer pay raises.

Like an in-sync dragon boat team, a club with an appropriate focus on team-building will continually best itself, year after year. For the minute and a half it takes to race the length of two and half football fields, Behling says, "A stable boat won't wobble. It will just glide and go straight, because they're paddling as a team." ☺

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