AC 2008-181: THE SCAVENGER HUNT: A TEAM BUILDING EXERCISE

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Introduction

For US companies, team building is big business; in fact, in 2005, American companies spent over $20 billion on team-building activities.[1] A quick sweep of the Internet reveals some 44 million websites devoted to companies that tailor-make exercises to suit particular companies. Whether it be Enron's death-defying ATV rides across the Mojave Desert or a simple in-house game, companies are spending enormous amounts of money in attempts to build a certain *esprit de corps* among employees. Some exercises are active; some are passive. Some are physical; others are intellectual. Whatever the venue, the objective is to produce teams that exhibit synergy.

Most universities are not equipped with either materials or budget to allow instructors the luxury of taking their students surfing in Maui. However, there are a number of inexpensive, fun exercises that can promote congenial collaboration in classes that depend on positive, long-term group interactions.

This paper focuses on a team-building exercise used in a senior project class that requires students to be in the same groups for 30 weeks; it includes background information on business/industry practices, explains the exercise, and offers student reactions.

Current Business/Industry Practices

Teams, as defined by group dynamics experts Johnson and Johnson, are a group on individuals who exhibit these five characteristics:

- are aware of their positive interdependence as they strive to achieve mutual goals
- interact while they do so
- are aware of who is and is not a member of the team
- have specific roles or functions to perform
- have a limited lifespan of membership[2]

Team building consists of "a series of activities that improve the performance of a team by strengthening the relationships between team members."[3] Like many things in business, team-building activities tend to occur in waves. In the 1990s, physical activities dominated, such as paintball, beach volleyball, inflated sumo suit wrestling, a Friday night dinner: relationship-building opportunities intended to get people together in a social setting.[4] The new millennium has ushered in more exotic exercises, such as the now-infamous Burger King firewalk for marketing employees (parodied in a recent episode of the TV series *The Office*), which resulted in 12 people receiving treatment for first and second degree burns,[5] or the spanking of a California Alarm One employee, which led to a $1.7 million lawsuit for public humiliation.[6]

Tamer examples, with a playful aspect, include Microsoft's Iron Chef approach to time management: in the UK division, employees were transported to a farmhouse in the Cotswald, divided into five teams, and given seven hours to produce a gourmet three-course meal. Developed by Team Quest, a commercial vendor, the experience also included an assessment of effectiveness; according to company data, 55% of participants indicated that the exercise was a "very effective team building event," and one employee noted that "it was a great way to get to know the other individuals in the group–I feel more confident approaching other people in the group to help with my work now."[7]

Such "getting to know you" exercises are abundant in business and industry. Another major type is the "morale booster" activity, such as the Boeing Company's band room. In 2006, members of the 777 line, with management encouragement, formed a musical group; they bought equipment, decorated a room, and set up shop to provide respite for their co-workers, especially during lunch breaks. Office administrator Rebecca Arnold notes that "Our team communication has improved because of our music bond."[8]

Other businesses focus on employee contentment by providing free on-site food trolleys, exercise classes (pilates and tai chi), drink carts, even dry cleaning drop-offs and pick-ups,[9] all in an attempt to keep employees happy, develop trust between management and lower-echelon employees, and stem the exorbitant costs of turnover, estimated at about $140 billion, annually.[10]

A third type of activity is the extravagant Enron-style adventure quests, usually reserved for upper management. Companies hire high-priced vendors to develop challenging activities designed to develop communication, stress management, and leadership skills. The rationale is to remove people from their usual comfort zones and require them to bond in alien situations. For example, HellermannTyton, a manufacturer of network products and wiring accessories based in Milwaukee, hired Odyssey Experiences to transform a Naples, Florida, private reserve into a South American jungle, complete with appropriate fauna such as giraffes, alligators, and leopards.[10] Campfire Adventures offers dog sledding in Finland and South African safaris.[11] And Action Centered Training offers thematically based adventures. Its "Inflatable Olympics" includes a rather strange competition: a special suit allows wearers to hurl themselves at a Velcro wall and stick to it.[12]

How effective are team-building exercises? The literature gives mixed reviews. Some employee testimonials indicate that the event itself led to greater understanding of their co-workers, such as

Terry Tuttle's comment about the HellermannTyton safari experience, "The teambuilding exercise resulted in camaraderie and a sense of respect and trust."[10] Others are more skeptical, using adjectives such as "childish,"[11] "time-wasting," and "cheesy."[9] As *Wall Street Journal* columnist Jared Sandberg wryly remarks, "everyone in a 'trust fall'. . . lands safely in the arms of their colleagues. It only proves that colleagues prefer not to be sued."[12]

It is essential to recognize that team building is a process that cannot be achieved by occasional events, however exotic and thrilling those enterprises may be. Team building occurs over time, and such activities serve as "baby steps"[13] towards a larger, long-term goal of improved team performance.

Time in academia, however, differs from time in business. Academic calendars, especially the quarter system, allow for much less time to achieve team goals, and activities therefore must be more compressed and shorter in duration: most team ventures in higher education strive to achieve team cohesiveness and productivity within a few short weeks.

What follows is a description of a "getting to know you," non-assessment oriented team-building exercise in a senior project class, where the students are in the same groups for 30 weeks. However, this exercise is quite versatile and not limited to senior project. Creative instructors can find a myriad ways to adapt it for other purposes; for example, to familiarize freshmen with their new campus, to acquaint students in a research-based course with library resources, or as a means to foster interdepartmental student relationships.

One particular challenge in a team-based senior project is that the students have been together in the same classes for several years; they know each other, are familiar with each other's work ethic, and have already determined who they want to work with. The students, however, do not choose their own teams; the faculty do, and we aim for a mixture of talent, academic achievement, and disciplinary interests.

The Scavenger Hunt

The civil engineering senior project at OIT is a team affair: not only are students in teams for the academic year, the faculty also functions as a team and consists of four civil instructors (one for each of the field's sub-disciplines: geotechnical, environmental, structures, transportation) and two communications instructors, in the areas of technical communication and group dynamics. This means that, as a faculty, we must practice what we preach to our students in terms of group communications, as conflicts will inevitably arise. Furthermore, it is an integrated approach, with engineering and communication viewed–and evaluated–holistically, rather than as separate components.

To reinforce our initial goal of developing congenial and collaborative teams, we decided to include an icebreaker team-building exercise early in the fall quarter; it would provide good experience in group problem-solving and task delegation, get students out of the classroom, and involve minimal investment. The goal for students was to retrieve as many items as possible from a list of 25. Not all of the items were physical objects; some involved examining campus

monuments or reading trophies in display cases to find the information. Figure 1 is the list for the 2007-8 senior class.

1. A java jacket
2. A pinecone
3. Who was governor of Oregon in 1962?
4. A pamphlet on OCD
5. When did David Pott graduate from OIT?
6. A copy of *Graduating Engineer & Computer Careers*
7. What is the fine for parking in a handicapped spot?
8. A change of address form
9. In which building would you find an interferometer?
10. When did SME win an award for student chapter excellence?
11. A condom
12. A campus map
13. A fast food wrapper
14. Where is the Dennis Findorff survey benchmark located?
15. Which building houses the giant sliderule?
16. What is the object dedicated to Erik Peterson?
17. Who was Harry Boivin?
18. A red leaf
19. A business card from an OIT engineering/technology faculty member (not civil)
20. Who won the Lew Jones Award in 1994?
21. An information card for the La Verne College of Law
22. A bookmark from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
23. A 2007-8 FAFSA form
24. In which building is the cadaver lab?
25. A flyer about an OUS foreign studies program

Extra credit: Who said "You are the master of the moments of your life"?

Figure 1. 2007-8 scavenger hunt list

The list is a mixture of simple items (pinecones are very common on campus, and each coffee outlet has java jackets) and more obscure questions (#10 and #20). Some items are campus landmarks, such as the small survey benchmark shown in Figure 2.

Instructions also include basic ground rules, such as not using computers or cell phones and not making copies of the list (each group of students receives only one copy of the list, to promote more sharing and foster problem-solving strategies).

Groups that violate a ground rule are disqualified. Establishing time parameters is essential: students have 5 minutes to develop a strategy and 25 minutes to find the items.

Figure 2. Survey benchmark

We also included an element of fun: because the hunt took place the week before Halloween, groups received official "trick or treat" bags, and each bag had some candies for an extra energy boost.

Figure 3 shows one group, Mountain Lakes Engineering, huddled in a pre-hunt strategy meeting. The objective is to develop an approach which uses the allotted time most efficiently. Members of this team are graduating in winter term.

In Figure 4, Lakeside Engineering holds an interim meeting, to determine what they still need to collect. In an 8-person team, students discovered that communication was essential.

After 25 minutes, the students return to the classroom and the civil faculty check their items against the list (see Figure 5). The winning team receives prizes: small plastic gold medals and Halloween PEZ dispensers.

Figure 3. Mountain Lakes group strategizing

Figure 4. An interim meeting

Student Responses

In keeping with the advice from the professional literature regarding team building, we also conduct a de-briefing, using the following questions:

- What did you do for your 5 minutes before the hunt?
- What was your strategy for collecting items? Did you elect a leader?
- Was this strategy successful? What what else could you have done?

- Was there any conflict on your group? About what?
- What items were you most successful finding?
- What items/questions were you unable to find? Why?
- What did you learn about team building?

In the three years that we have been conducting this exercise, team sizes have varied, depending on the number of students enrolled in senior project. This year, we have 29 students, but last year only 16. The size of the team, we have discovered, affects the initial strategy session. Last year, teams collected items as "pods," as one student described it, since each team had only 4 members. This year, with teams of 8, students split into subgroups and divided the items according to building location; two teams even tore the list into pieces to share out the items. However, the larger team size meant holding an interim meeting or two, so each subgroup could report in. No teams elected leaders, but each depended on team members' knowledge of the campus. No teams experienced any conflict, primarily, they noted, due to the short time frame of the exercise.

Figure 5. Civil engineering professor Michael Cornachione checks the Optimus Group's collection

Most teams thought that their strategies were successful. In considering alternatives, one team noted that synchronizing watches with the classroom clock would have been useful, as they unintentionally shorted themselves on time. Another team considered asking for help, but decided against that; they figured they would receive wrong information, since this was a competition.

The items that were easiest to find were the physical ones: pinecones, java jackets, leaves. The most difficult included "Who won the Lew Jones Award in 1994?" and the location of the cadaver lab, which had been recently moved to our new health sciences building.

Given student responses, the exercise was a successful in raising their awareness about issues involved in team-building. They reported the following as most important:

- Communication
- Task delegation
- Reading the ground rules
- Working together

Conclusions

Team work in academia is becoming increasingly more important as preparation for the contemporary workplace, where, as Blau notes, "the team in now the norm."[11] Students do not intuitively know how to function in teams; group dynamics are skills to be learned and honed over a lifetime. A team-building exercise such as the scavenger hunt, when used early in the

term, can help nourish cohesiveness among class members and underscore the importance of working together. And, of course, the playful aspect helped boost student and faculty morale.

One isolated experience, however, is not sufficient. As business consultant Susan Heathfield explains, "You will not build team-work by retreating as a group for a couple of days each year. Think of team-building as something you do every single day."[14] We can achieve that in our courses by occasionally using formal team-building activities, such as the scavenger hunt, to create an overall atmosphere where students feel comfortable working together to achieve mutual goals.

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