

THE MANAGEMENT WORLD



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Is Team Building a Luxury?

When companies are monitoring expenses so carefully and jobs are being cut faster than you can say "rising unemployment figures," can managers really justify team-building exercises?

According to some experts, it's in times like these that team-building activities are most needed. It is important, they say, to recognize what the changed economic climate means to workers who are called on to do more with fewer resources. In turbulent periods, employees may be fearful about the future of the company and may worry that they may be the next to be laid off. Managers need to be honest, acknowledge the stress employees are feeling and validate their concerns. For many companies, team building becomes a means of regrouping staff after layoffs. When a team is learning to operate in a new, no-frills environment, group activities designed to foster collaborative problem solving can be especially productive.

Team-Building Tips

Beyond acknowledging the struggling economy, here are three considerations.

1. Present real-world problems.

Some experts believe focusing on real-life scenarios is crucial, especially with team-building for managers, but also when the exercises are directed at other — or all — levels. A corollary of this idea is to ensure that employees build upon what they have learned when they return to work. Certainly, having employees engage in purely fun activities as a respite from the constant bad news may reduce stress and foster togetherness, and engaging in a philanthropic activity can make employees feel good about their company. But neither translates into helping to solve an immediate or pressing business problem, such as how

to streamline a process or readjust to new circumstances.

2. Account for different styles and personalities.

One employee may love a certain exercise, while another may hate it. Or, place employees in different roles than those they're used to so that they can appreciate what other groups are going through.

3. Choose a facilitator who will tailor the program to you.

Make sure the person or company will work on what you want to accomplish rather than insisting on what they think you need.

Team building doesn't necessarily require an outside facilitator or a special time or place. Good managers incorporate elements of team-building activities into their teams' day-to-day work.

Experts suggest that companies can't simply cut costs or downsize as a way to be successful; part of any restructuring effort must focus on innovation. That's hard to do when facing negative events inside the organization or in a poor economy, so engineering an atmosphere that fosters innovation is important and team-building exercises can be a real contributor to the long-term success of the company.

Excerpted from: *Team-Building Exercises for Tough Times* by Pat Carlson <http://harvardbusiness.org/>

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