

Outdoor Team Development – Are We Mixing Our Metaphors?

Most of us are probably aware that paintballing and quadbiking, though great entertainment, do little to develop an effective team, but have we really thought about *why*? **Shirley Gaston** investigates the power of metaphor in outdoor learning.

metaphor, *n.* a figure of speech by which a thing is spoken of as being that which it only resembles. *-adjs.* metaphoric, *-al.* *-adv.* metaphorically. *-n.* met'aphorist. *-mixed metaphor*, an expression in which two or more metaphors are confused [Gr. *metaphora-pherein* to carry]

In choosing activities as part of team development programme, we might be sending messages through metaphor which are the *opposite* of what we are actually aiming for.

For example, if there are team members who equate quadbiking with splashing mud in their co-workers' faces, speed, and 'beating' colleagues, how easy will it be for a team to walk away from that kind of experience with a renewed sense of collaboration and a commitment to sharing best practice for the benefit of the organisation?

If paintballing brings to mind combat, hiding in trees and outwitting the opposition, how can we expect a team to arrive back in the workplace with a commitment to openness and integrity?

Fun is important – but having fun is not enough to develop a team. There is a real danger that teams could come away from 'teambuilding' events with all the wrong messages.

People's preconceived notions and related experiences can stand in the way of what we are aiming for.

The activity – work connection

Very few organisations have to orienteer, climb trees or raft rivers as part of their day-to-day business activities. By their very nature, outdoor activities are removed from the everyday workplace and this is part of their power. Isn't it therefore true that we are hoping that outdoor activities will provide an *appropriate* metaphor for the work we do within an organisation?

By engaging in activities that demand physical, emotional and intellectual attention, the conscious mind is distracted long enough for the unconscious mind to begin seeking out meaning in the form of new connections. Barriers to learning, cynicism and old habits can be forgotten in the new environment, allowing new directions to emerge.

Generating *effective* metaphor can be as straightforward as falling off a log - at the simplest level, we are trying to link the way a team interacts with what happens in the workplace. The way a team works together in collaboratively solving a problem for example, provides a straightforward metaphor for project completion at work.

A team is defined by their pursuit of a common goal. In order to reinforce this, activities need to be set up to provide this as opposed to individual goals or competition.

Aligning values and objectives

There is currently a great deal of talk about 'values-driven' teams and organisations – do we need to consider whether activities we choose are re-inforcing the right values?

We certainly need to ensure that the metaphors associated with the activities we choose are aligned with corporate objectives.

It may not be impossible for a good facilitator to draw positive learning points from a competitive experience, but we know that learning takes place at an unconscious level, so we're battling against an awful lot to get there – and is it worth the risk?

If outdoor activities are to enable teams to develop in line with current theory about best management practice surely we need to be choosing activities which necessitate collaboration, sharing information, and a determination to reach win-win solutions.

If an organisational objective is to enhance creativity – wouldn't an arts based development programme be the most appropriate medium? Teams could work together to stage a theatrical production, a fashion show or an orchestral manoeuvre in the dark!

If the objective is to develop problem-solving skills – wouldn't a programme of collaborative tasks supported by focused reviewing of the problem-solving strategies used be most appropriate?

Collaborative community projects such as constructing a path at a nature reserve, if well facilitated, can develop the team whilst sending the right messages about environmental awareness and use of resources.

It is not just the activities that are important; effective reviewing skills can enhance the right metaphors. Given powerful strategies for the transfer of learning, the *right* metaphors can be translated into real business benefits.

The power of outdoor development

There is no shortage of academic research that justifies outdoor development as a valid training medium. Outdoor development can be *very* powerful. Messages can be taken on at very deep level. Tasks are

compelling and are able to distract the mind long enough to activate an unconscious search for meanings, truths and learnings.

Seeing things from a new perspective can provide dimensions of understanding that simply weren't there before.

Outdoor development can be effective as well as powerful. Clear objectives are important, as are an examination of organisational values. Activities need to be planned carefully to reinforce these messages and review and follow-up is essential if the experience is to have a positive impact on workplace performance.

It is clear that outdoor experiences can remain with people at a conscious and an unconscious level for a very long time. Isn't it then essential that we get *every* aspect right, and send the right messages with the activities that we choose?

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