

EXPERIENTIAL TRAINING: A STEPPING STONE FOR WORK TEAMS

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Teams in the workplace are rapidly growing in popularity and acceptance. Corporate America is beginning to realize that the “old ways” are no longer going to work. Time changes everything and so businesses must change also or perish. Work teams have emerged as a progressive alternative to the outdated hierarchical trickle-down organization. For most businesses using teams is a radical change and for others it is only an extension of what they already practice. No matter what the background of an organization, the switch to teams is difficult and often frustrating.

The number of types of teams is astonishing; there are teams for practically every need. There are also innumerable ways of organizing teams, and every authority has a different opinion as to the right method of team organization. Trying to juggle all of the variables can become a monstrous task overwhelming to the most organized of individuals. To aid in the confusion (and of course make a profit along the way) there are consulting organizations which have experience in developing and managing teams and for a fee, will help organizations birth and rear their own teams. Many consulting firms specialize in experiential training, which is touted as an extremely powerful tool in the development and maintenance of work teams.

What is the Purpose of Experiential Training?

Experiential training can take on many forms but all of them have the same essence. All of the trainings consist of an activity outside of the usual work activities. Some are done on an individual basis, but most that are designed to assist in the development and maintenance of teams are performed with teams. They all share a common goal – to bring to the surface problematic issues, to develop communication among team members, to develop habits of individual and group reflection, and to develop a positive social environment.

To bring to the surface problematic issues:

One could very safely make the statement that all work teams have problems. Of course the problems are of varying degrees and varieties. The most common causes of problems within work teams are human nature and the organizational set-up. Human nature will

always throw a monkey wrench into the most carefully laid plans, because it is quite simply unpredictable. Experiential training focuses on bringing those human problems to the surface. By taking individuals out of the work situation it is often easier to assess what personalities are interacting and how they are effecting the work. When individuals are outside of the work environment the safety net of “work” disappears and they are forced to see what results form their interactions. They can no longer blame the work, because it is not there; they must look at where the problem truly lies – within themselves. When teams can begin to understand how they impact each other, then it is easier for them to see how the organizational set-up impacts them. Rivera (1997).

To develop communication among team members:

It would seem like blanket common sense to say that communication is essential for work teams to be successful. However, team communication is often overlooked or viewed as unessential. With experiential training communication is key if the teams are to have any success performing the activities. Most experiential training activities are difficult, but not impossible, and almost all of them are things that the team members have never done before. As so, the team members are on equal ground facing a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, which they must overcome. Individual teams will approach the obstacle in various manners. Some will jump right in, others will lie out a plan, and still others will just throw up their hands and claim the task is impossible. While each team will take a different approach, the end lesson is always the same – if they do not communicate with one another then they will fail. This lesson often takes the team by surprise and it always makes an impact. The importance of communication is made clear and by performing the task and overcoming the task, the team members begin to learn how to communicate with one another. These lessons are simple yet paramount if work teams are to succeed in the cut -throat world of business. Bendicsen (1997).

To develop habits of individual and group reflection:

During experiential training, debriefing is constant and thorough. After each exercise the facilitator will lead a debriefing in which team members will discuss what just happened. They discuss what they did well, what they did poorly, what they could have done differently, how they feel about the outcome, and what they have learned. Debriefing is a tool to help the team members understand what they experienced and consequently learned, it is also a time to voice concerns and insights. It teaches the team to assess what they are doing so that they can learn from there past activities so as to be able to constantly improve themselves as individuals and as a team. Rivera (1997). As the training progresses, the team will see improvements in their abilities to achieve the tasks and overcome the obstacles. As the session proceeds they string their learnings together and start to see how important review and self reflection is to their success. By understanding the importance of individual and group reflection in an experiential training session, work teams will hopefully be able to carry it over into their work environment. Bendicsen (1997).

To develop a positive social environment:

To assume that individuals can work within a team setting and have absolutely no social interaction is unrealistic. People are by nature social creatures, and when you put them together a social situation develops. For work teams to be productive the social situation must be addressed and a positive social situation created. It is very common for individual to feel like they must keep all personal aspects separate and away from work, this of course is an impossible situation. Experiential training addresses the social aspects and tries to help teams to develop a positive social environment. It is important for team members to understand each other and to get along for them to be a productive team. During experiential training issues like emotion, personality, and relationships are addressed. Often for the first time team members can see the "real person" of their teammate. It is not uncommon for team members to be amazed at personality traits that they never knew existed among themselves. They also learn how to use these different personalities to help themselves work better. Emotions are also expressed much more openly during experiential training than in the work environment. Since emotions are a constant in any situation it is important for team member to be able to recognize them and work through them or utilize them to achieve their goal. These learning will carry over into the work environment making the team social environment much more positive, because they understand each other better and are more capable of dealing with the social interaction that affect their work. Rivera (1997).

What Happens During Experiential Training?

Experiential training, just like the organizations it serves, comes in many different shapes and sizes. A specialized program can be developed for each individual organization, or there are standard programs that can be used. Whatever the need of the organization, there is more than likely an experiential training activity to be utilized as a tool. One of the more popular forms of experiential training is a ropes course, there are also computer programs, board games, wilderness weekends, and even billiards. While each of them approaches training from a different start, they all do essentially the same thing.

A very popular board game used to train work teams is called Self-managed Work Teams: A Business Simulation. People Tech Products in Toronto, Ontario, manufacture the game. Participants play the role of members of a new team in an imaginary organization. The entire exercise takes place during a one-day workshop. The game takes on a real life feel by paralleling normal team development of forming, storming, norming, and performing. While playing the game members of the teams face issues of monitoring quality control, fulfilling the customer order, investing in employee training and development, and meeting the customers needs. The game plays a big part in teaching broad issues and principles of business, as well as team development and processes. Solomon (1993).

April Training Executive Limited, of Frodsham in Cheshire England, is a consulting firm that uses their computer based business simulation as experiential training. The game uses work teams and simulates the Western European automobile industry. Teams are

formed with a minimum of four people per team for the ten - twelve week game. One of the main objectives of this game is to help employees understand exactly what it is that other employees do. For instance, an accountant will have to the opportunity to experience engineering, advertising, customer services, and manufacturing during the process of the game. These are areas which an accountant would not normally have had experience in. By understanding what it is that other team members do, working together becomes a much easier task. In this way, cross-knowledge teams are prepared to work together in a productive manner, appreciating and trusting the other member's knowledge of their field. Brewer (1992).

Physical activities are also a major form of experiential training. For instance, Southwest Airlines Co brings in the consulting firm of Pritchett and Associates, located in Dallas Texas, to direct workshops at their Dallas based headquarters. Solomon (1993). During the workshops members participate in physical activities such as Crocodile River.© This exercise takes place in a large room with four wooden platforms that vary in size from three feet by four feet, two feet by two feet, and five feet by five feet. Members of the team are on the smaller platforms, using only two boards, one long and one short; the team must safely transfer all of its members to the larger platform while overcoming varied obstacles. The game is difficult and a lot of fun, but it is also frustrating for the team members. They have to work together in order to succeed and that is not always easy. In order to succeed in the game the members must communicate, plan ahead, work together, etc. Liz Henna, of Southwest Airlines, says that by the end of the workshop the difference in the team members is overwhelming. They have learned valuable skills that help them work together as a productive team, and they had fun doing it. Solomon (1993).

Ropes courses are yet another popular form of experiential training. The Experience Center at Hyatt Bear Creek, in Dallas Texas, runs a ropes course designed for outdoor experiential training of business and corporations. Training usually lasts one day but can take as long as three days. There are low ropes courses, which are obstacles that the team must work through on the ground, and there are high ropes, which the team must work through while high in the air. The Experience Center specializes in high ropes experiential training. There are several tall poles and platforms, which the team members must climb or go across. They all wear harnesses similar to what is used in rock climbing. The activities are safe but require a lot of teamwork, communication, and trust. According to Peggy Rivera, the manager and senior facilitator at Bear Creek, most teams go through much the same process. All team members come in with fear, it is usually unwanted, and is based in the fear of the unknown. The program attempts to resolve those fears as well as the issues that are hindering team development. Everyone feels silly in the harnesses and most are afraid of climbing the twenty-foot poles, they are all on equal ground. Managers, CEOs, accountants, general employees, etc. are all the same – there are no rank distinctions. Every team member must communicate, listen and work together as a team to accomplish the task and achieve the goal. Personality traits come to the surface because people lose their inhibitions during the exercise.

When the true personality of an individual comes to the surface the other team members can begin to understand why they act the way they do at work. This understanding makes working together in a team much easier. During the exercise they learn to trust the system, which in this case is their team, they learn to take risks and to go outside their comfort zone, because they trust their system to catch them if they fall. When teams can do this in the workplace, then creativity and productivity skyrocket. This is a huge step for most work teams because most are so afraid of failing that they cannot succeed. By taking the team members outside of their work environment, ropes courses can achieve incredible team trust and communication. Rivera (1997).

Ropes courses tend to have such a profound impact on work teams that Saturn Auto decided to give them a try. They reached this decision after sending out 99 individuals to various parts of the world to interview different businesses and corporations. They wanted to know why companies succeeded and why they failed. After compiling their findings they discovered that the major resource that a company has is its employees. Acting on this knowledge, Saturn began looking for ways to utilize this resource to its maximum capacity. Their search led them to a major experiential training company in the United States of America, Pecos River. Saturn began sending teams of employees to Pecos River to participate in ropes courses. They found the results to be very favorable. Rivera (1997). However, the money expenditure was very large, so Saturn created its own experiential training consulting firm, Saturn Consulting Services. They developed their own ropes course in Springhill, Tennessee, and now use it with almost all of their employees. They have begun branching out and now contract out their services to other companies. In fact their major client at present time is General Motors. General Motors saw the success that Saturn was having and decided that experiential training was a valid tool in the attempt to restructure themselves. General Motors is now in the process of developing their own ropes course and consulting firm, just like Saturn. Gramm (1997).

How does Experiential Training Influence Team Effectiveness?

Experiential training is an extremely valuable tool in raising work team effectiveness. In order to understand how experiential training influences team effectiveness it is necessary what an effective team is. This can be done by investigating the goals, characteristics, and productivity of effective work teams.

Goals of effective work teams:

Goals play a major part in any organization; the question is what goals do effective work teams have. Covey (1996) has a rather compact answer for this question. In his experience he has discovered that effective work teams have a pronounced goal to operate successfully on five general levels. The five levels are the interpersonal level, the managerial level, the social level, the organizational level, and the personal level. Covey has found that if a work team can meet the goal of functioning efficiently and successfully on each of these five levels, then they will be an effective team. It is also understood that experiential training can aid in the achievement of the goal by training in one if not all five of the levels. Experiential training is a useful tool in developing

interpersonal and social competence within a team. The training teaches members how to appreciate each other, trust each other, and work together. The social competence is somewhat of a side effect of experiential training; if team members can work well interpersonally, then the social situation is greatly improved. Not only can experiential training assist in the achievement of successfully working at the interpersonal and social levels, it can also assist in the managerial and organizational levels. By equipping the team with problem solving skills and an understanding of the organizational set-up, experiential training greatly increases a team's ability to work with management and to understand the organization so as to be a productive part of it. Last but not least, experiential training has an impact on the personal level, it raises understanding and tolerance and increases motivation, and when a team is working well together the individual person experiences increased contentment.

Since it is almost impossible to set down an across the board set of goals for effective teams there are several versions. Howell (1990) has his own set of goals for an effective work team, yet they interact with Covey's very well. Howell has observed a set of five goals that help to produce an effective work team. Howell says that work teams must: 1. Clarify and agree upon issues of responsibility. 2. Develop among themselves and between other teams cooperation, coordination, and communication. 3. Identify and resolve potential problems that could hinder their performance, if they are to be productive. 4. Be willing to explore and utilize creative options with which to increase their productivity. 5. Set standards of excellence. Once again experiential training is extremely useful in helping work teams to achieve these goals in order it be effective. One of the major purposes of experiential training is to develop cooperation, coordination, and communication within a team – this is directly linked to the second goal. The second goal can be made an attainable by utilizing the skill learned from experiential training. During an experiential training activity teams also learn how to review a situation, develop plans, disperse responsibility, and work together to achieve the task at hand. All of these can boost a team's ability to obtain goals one and three. The fourth goal can also be made easier to achieve through experiential training. During an exercise team members are performing tasks which they have never done before, they are forced to be creative, to look for unique approaches, and to take chances. All of which will hopefully be carried over to the work environment to help the work team achieve the fourth goal. Experiential training can influence the fifth goal, but only the work team can make the decision to set standards of excellence.

Characteristics of effective work teams:

Trying to determine the exact characteristics that are a part of effective teams is a lofty and often seemingly unobtainable goal. There are countless varieties of work teams and people are different individually and as such the group personality is unique to each team. There are however some general characteristics, which seem to be a part of most successful work teams. As with the goals of effective work teams, experiential training can be useful in helping to develop and maintain these characteristics.

Koehler (1989) was able to ascertain three essential characteristics, which he has observed to be influential in the effectiveness of work teams. Koehler discovered that work teams need to be able to not only understand their own team objectives, but they need to understand what they do for and how they relate to the overall company. Work teams also need to be able to work together with the understanding that while some goals may be realized individually, some require a group effort to achieve them. Lastly, Koehler has found that it is important for team members to be able to not only understand, but appreciate the various skills and backgrounds that their team members bring to the team. With a little experiential training under their belts, work teams will be equipped with the skill to foster and develop the above characteristics. These characteristics are all dealt with head on during experiential training, the training can help to open team members eyes to the importance of these characteristics as well as teach skill so that they can begin developing them within their work team.

May and Schwoerer (1994) have also developed a list of what they consider to be essential characteristics of effective work teams. They include successful job performance, positive social modeling, verbal encouragement, and interpretation and resolution of stress and anxiety related to job performance. Once again experiential training can be a useful tool in the development of these characteristics. Verbal encouragement is always a major aspect of experiential training activities; team members are encouraged to encourage each other and to gracefully accept encouragement themselves. They also learn problem solving which includes finding the problem (such as stress or anxiety) and resolving the problem in a positive manner. Social modeling fits in very well with experiential training because of all of the social interaction and people skills that are learned. While it does not directly influence job performance, experiential training does impact it through the skills that the individuals and the team as a whole learn.

Productivity of effective work teams:

Productivity is a tricky topic – exactly how do you achieve it? There are several clinical opinions on what powers work teams to productivity and most seem to be valid and intelligent keys to boosting productivity. McCullough (1995) has discovered what he refers to as the five keys that will power work teams to productivity. While his claim that it can be wholly achieved in 90 – 120 days is questionable, there is no doubt that the five keys he touts are useful in boosting work team productivity. According to McCullough the five keys to productivity are: 1. The mission, values, and vision of the company must be shared. 2. The paradigms of management must change. 3. A new methodology is needed. 4. It is important to consider and use how adults learn. 5. It is critical to have a powered start (management support, trained personnel, and an across the board changeover). While experiential training may not be able to help directly with all of the “keys,” it can assist in an indirect manner. By having to diagnose problems, plan solutions and implement the solutions, team members learn the importance of sharing and communication, both of which are also essential to the five “keys.” It also teaches that it is good to try new things and approach problems and opportunities from different

direction, which will hopefully also carry over and help in the development of the five “keys.”

Gustafson and Kleiner (1994 p16-19) defined a more lengthy set of qualities for high performance. Experiential training can have more of a direct impact on their list of qualities or “keys.” The Gustafson, Kleiner list consists of eight qualities. The following list of the eight qualities for high performance work teams is taken directly from their work. 1. Participative leadership, 2. Shared responsibilities, 3. A definition of purpose, 4. High communication, 5. A focused future, 6. Focused tasks, 7. Creative talents, and 8. Rapid responses. Experiential training, when used properly, can have a profound impact on almost all of these qualities. Not only can it teach these qualities, but it can also help work teams to implement them and to assist in the continued maintenance of the qualities. Experiential training teaches team members how to communicate, how to focus on a task, how to look for solutions they would not normally use, and how to work together to accomplish a daunting task. These qualities of highly productive teams are not unobtainable; it simply takes a little training, a willingness to try new things, and a commitment. Experiential training would be an excellent tool to help any work team achieve these important qualities so as to become a highly productive team.

How Does Experiential Training Effect Individuals?

It is very easy to become team-focused and to dismiss the individuals. However, when this occurs, the likely-hood of team failure rises. Teams are quite simply groups of individuals, there is no way to separate the two – they are synonymous. It is important to consider the individual when considering the team – they are after all extensions of each other. It is important to look at individual issues such as employee empowerment, individual skills needed, and individual team participation.

Employee empowerment:

Employee empowerment has been a catch phrase for almost two decades now. DeMeuse (1996). Human Resource people and consultants have been touting employee empowerment as a huge motivator and productivity elevator. The question is, how does a company achieve this. The question of employee empowerment also relates directly to work teams – how do you empower individuals as well as the team as a whole? Johnson (1993) addresses this issue in his Polarity Management seminars. Johnson says that companies often concentrate so hard on the teams that they overlook the individual. He uses a polarity map as a tool to help companies evaluate whether their emphasis is on the team, the individual, or both. The ultimate goal is to balance the polarities so that equal emphasis is given to both the negative and positive aspects and issues of individuals and teams. The polarity map looks something like:

Individual	Team
Positive	Positive
Negative	Negative

To use the above polarity map, write in the appropriate quadrant the concentrations, outcomes, influences, emphasis, and whatever else may be useful. Any quadrant is a good starting point, just make sure to fill them all in. When the polarity map is finished, it will be simple to see what is happening with the individuals and the teams. With this knowledge, it is easier to see where the problems are and possible solutions as to how to solve them. This is a useful tool that can be carried beyond any experiential training to be incorporated into self-analysis of work teams.

The importance of employee empowerment came strongly into view when a study was conducted on three general hospitals. The study by Hayes (1994) concentrated on registered nurses (RN) and nurse’s aids (NA) in the three separate hospitals. There had been quite a lot of difficulty with the two groups working together; the situation was on the brink of being totally out of control. The hospital had tried everything that they could think of and soon turned to experiential training. The facilitators started by explaining and discussing Kafka’s categories of basic motivators. They are: belonging, recognition, personal self-worth, and control. Hayes (1994). It soon became obvious that these basic issues of employee empowerment were being completely ignored, which resulted in their problem. Through experiential training the RNs and NAs learned about each other’s jobs. They began to understand the stresses, joys, and issues related to each other’s jobs. During the experiential training they learned to communicate their needs to each other, and they learned the importance of trying to meet those needs. With time the situation turned itself completely around. An environment of sharing and communication took its place. The individual’s basic needs for motivation were taken care of and the teams began to work like a well-oiled machine.

Experiential training gives the teams the skills they need to empower each other and themselves. Simply being in a team does not guarantee empowerment; it must be worked for at the individual level, the team level, and the corporate level. Using experiential training to foster employee empowerment is a great starting point for creating an environment of empowerment both for the individual and the team.

Individual skills:

It would be ideal if any group of individuals could be slapped together to make a good work team, but this is not the case. The individuals in a team play a major part in whether or not it will succeed. It is not based so much on personality as it is on skills. It is important that the individual team members have the skills to complete the task at hand as well as the skill to work in a team. McCullough (1995) has learned from his research

and years of experience that there are essentially five critical skill that an individual needs to be part of a work team. They are: 1. Participation skills 2. Meeting management skills (Planning, organizing, dealing with logistics & conducting meetings) 3. Process-thinking skills 4. Problem-solving skills 5. Presentation skills. While no amount of experiential training can ever gift an individual with these skills, it can help individuals to begin developing them, to understand their importance, and to begin utilizing them effectively. By going through experiential training the individual has the opportunity to actually experience the use of these skills. By knowing what it is like to use the skills an individual can take them back to their team and become a productive team member.

According to Simmons (1993) there are much broader skills needed to be a productive member of a team. Simmons focuses on the broad skill topics of basic actions and attitudes. There are some basic actions which team members must be able to perform. They include things like developing vision for the future, following through on initiatives, making sure that plans are implemented, and reviewing successes so as to learn from them. There are also basic attitudes which team members need to have and exhibit in order for the team to work. Individuals need to be able to work to understand the whole situation, develop high self-esteem (both within themselves and within their team members), build close relationships with other team members, and take positive initiatives instead of complaining or passing blame. Once again experiential training can be instrumental in helping individuals uncover, develop, and utilize the skills necessary to be a productive team member. Experiential training takes individuals out of the stress of everyday work and teaches them basic skills for teaming. The individuals have tasks to perform as a team, but along the way, they have to perform the basic skills necessary to be a good team member. Rivera (1997). More often than not, individuals are amazed at their capabilities when they are pointed out during debriefing. They have learned that they do have the necessary skill and that they can learn to use them just like they did during the experiential training.

Individual team participation:

A team can be all ready to go, they have management support, they are empowered, they have the necessary skills, they are trained in communication and problem solving – but they are missing a major piece of the puzzle. Without individual participation, there is no team. It is quite possible to have a team where some or all of the members are present at every meeting and yet never contribute anything; this is lack of participation. For a work team to be successful they must have full individual team member participation. Wright and Brauchle (1994) have a strategy to increase active participation. The strategy consists of three basic components: preparation, initiation, and maintenance. It is unrealistic to think that an individual can be thrown into groups and automatically participate and perform well. In general, people have a basic fear of the unknown, so the above strategy makes perfect sense. Team members need to be a part of the preparation to launch teams; they need to understand what is going on and how it will effect them. They will obviously take part in the initiation, but it needs to go beyond simply being a member of a team - they need to play an active role in the launching. Without maintenance even the most effective of teams will have a downward slope in their

productivity and in their social interactions, which can also result in non-participation. It is here that experiential training can have a strong impact. By periodically taking individuals out of their work setting, they have the opportunity to brush up on unused teaming skills and to discuss what they need to work on as a group – besides all of that, it's fun. Using experiential training is a great way to keep teams working at full capacity and keeping, if not increasing individual participation.

Individual participation in work teams can also be greatly affected by major changes in the organization. Business today is a whirlwind of downsizing, reorganizing, restructuring, and re-engineering, all of which effect the individual employees and consequently the work teams. It is in times of change that participation in teams falls off – it is also an opportune time, because of the culture of change, for experiential training. Rivera (1997). By being able to separate themselves from the immediacy of their situation, individuals can participate in games that will help them to understand what is happening in their company. When they are better able to understand, then they are better able to cope with the stress, so the fear of the unknown dies, and participation rises again to a productive level.

Experiential Training and Team Implementation

Experiential training can play a key role in the implementation of teams. It is essential to start off on a good foot when implementing teams. When the team members have gone through some form of experiential training they are much more equipped to handle the stresses and problems that work teams will initially face during their implementation. Reiste and Hubrich (1995) have determined what they consider to be the key factors to successful implementation of teams. There are eight of these keys: 1. Communication 2. Patience 3. Willingness to accept failure 4. Understand the synergy of the team 5. Acceptance 6. Harmonious work environment as result of previous five 7. Celebrate success 8. Continue training. If experiential training is done before the implementation of the teams then the probability of their success will grow. All of the above issues are addressed during experiential training, so transferring them over to their work teams from the very beginning is easy for team members. By using experiential training in the very beginning, a work team can start out in the correct manner as opposed to feeling their way around in the dark.

Hughes (1991) has also presented what he considers to be key factors in the implementation of teams. His list was quite a bit more expansive with a total of twenty-five stepping stones to successful implementation. Hughes is an advocate of experiential training and considers it to be one of the major stepping stones. He also points out various stepping stones in which experiential training would be helpful. A few of Hughes's stepping-stones are listed. Realize that team development is evolutionary and that immediate self-directed teams are unrealistic. Awareness training should occur early on to aid in the commonality of goals. Team implementation should be unique to location and group. Train in how to reach a consensus in decision making. Discuss what can go wrong and possible ways in which to prevent or repair it. Finally, the importance of communication can never be overstated. All of these and more can be addressed

through experiential training, which Hughes suggests as a useful to in the implementation process of work teams.

It is important to note that during the initial implementation, teams will go through certain processes or phases. There is the traditional model of forming, storming, norming, and performing. However, Cusumano (1994) took it one step beyond that. He observed five phases during the implementation of work teams at Catalytica Fine Chemicals, of which he is both president and chairman. According to Cusumano, Phase I, was full of team optimism. Phase II, was a state of confusion. Phase III, teams moved to a leader-centered functionality. Phase IV, fierce team loyalty developed. Phase V, teams reach self-direction. Catalytica Fine Chemicals had a difficult time managing all of the various phases but eventually managed to work their way through them. Had they thought to incorporate some experiential training before or during implementation, they might have had a much easier time. The training could have helped the teams understand more thoroughly what was about to happen to them and given them skills to help manage the process. Catalytica Fine Chemicals did the process on their own and succeeded, but they probably would have had a much easier time negotiating the phases had they used some form of experiential training.

Sustaining Teams Through Experiential Training

The implementation of work teams is truly a daunting task, but it does not end there. After teams are established and running well, they must continue to do so. This is where sustaining the work team effort comes into play. According to Wright and Brauchle (1994) sustaining the work team effort requires that certain factors be met. They include keeping the interest of the groups, assisting the groups as they work together, utilizing cross-functional teams, constant investment from management, and knowing when to call it quits. Experiential training can assist in keeping all of these factors afloat in the work teams. Periodic refresher courses will help keep the interest of the team members as well as allowing them to review where they are and evaluate where they need to go next. It also gives sleeping skills a wake up call so that they can be used when the teams return to “the daily grind.”

It is inevitable that as time goes on teams will become sluggish and loose their edge. This is natural and to be expected. It cannot however be allowed to run rampant. No amount of training will last forever and no amount of enthusiasm can bridge the gap of time – they need to be revived periodically. Periodic experiential training helps to revive and reinvigorate work teams when they drop below acceptable and desirable levels of performance. Carey (1992). According to Carey some symptoms of a performance drop can be seen in meetings, memorandums, and various other forms of interactions. It is important to be on the lookout for such symptoms and resolve the situation as soon as possible - experiential training is a wonderful tool to assist in this task.

Experiential training can be a powerful tool in the sustaining of work teams. A basic skill learned during experiential training is to constantly be evaluating the team to see what is going on. By evaluating itself a team can pick up on issues that could become problems

before they do so. Experiential training not only assists in the detection of problems, but it can also help work teams to resolve the issues that are causing the problems.

Transferring Experiential Training Learnings

It is absolutely imperative to realize that experiential training is a tool and cannot magically fix any and all work team problems. What it can do, though, is teach basic teaming skills, awareness, communication, etc that can be transferred back into the work setting. There are some basic rewards that result from experiential training. According to Todryk (1990), some of those benefits include an increased quality of work decisions and increase in collective team strength, which ultimately results in the team's ability to complete complex projects on time. Experiential training places a great emphasis on problem-solving to help achieve the above results. There are several aspects of experiential training which help to promote the learning of problem solving. To begin with there are always several various planned interactions. The training is usually done with intact teams, so taking the information back to the team and utilizing it is much easier. There is always facilitation by a third party which helps to bring to the surface issues which the work team is either unwilling or unable to see of their own accord.

While experiential training is useful to bring up issues and learn skill, it must be taken beyond the confounds of the experiential training activities and into the work environment. Experiential training is a deliberately charged environment to help produce abundant learnings in short periods of time. It is extremely valuable because it is always a simulation. Learning through simulation takes the risk out of the learning process. Todryk (1990). The outcome will not be held over their head so most of the success stressors are disengaged. When the stress is gone individuals are able to get lost in the exercise and their real self begins to emerge. When this happens a rare opportunity emerges. It is the opportunity to focus on the diversity of the group in a not threatening setting. By doing this many if not all of the interpersonal problems that teams may be having are diffused. The simulation also offers the opportunity for the participants to practice what they have learned in a harmless context. This makes it much easier to take back into the work teamwork environment.

To assist in all of this, experiential trainings are always facilitated. These facilitators play a key role in the transference of learnings from the experiential training session back into the work environment. The facilitators create the essential environment, which is non-threatening and yet charged. The environment allows for greater learning but must be carefully controlled - this is a major part of a facilitator's job. They are also responsible for teasing out different issues that are problematic. Facilitators do this by creating channels of open and honest communication. They push the individuals toward self and group realizations, but they do all of this in a positive manner. Rivera (1997). Facilitators often refer to the two sides of experiential training; there is the dark side and the light side. The light side consists of the feel good, get to know you, work together, and solve problems type of work. The dark side deals with the problematic issues facing teams. These issues are more often than not hidden, so the facilitator must work through several layers before they are able to bring up the dark issues that a work team is facing.

The issues range anywhere from emotions of fear, shame, and guilt, to deep-seated resentments, and to purposeful destruction of work teams. All of this is not necessarily enjoyable to work with, but if a work team is to be successful they must face these and other dark issues. Robbins (1993). A good facilitator can make the experience less negative and can help to bring about useful learning to be put into action within the work team.

A major part of the transference of experiential training learnings to the work environment is done once again by the facilitator. By debriefing during and after each exercise, facilitators are able to make strong and deliberate connections from the simulation to the daily work. This works best when an actual intact work team participates in experiential training. They are able to face issues as a group, learn as a group, and grow as a group. With the help of constant debriefings from a facilitator, the team is able to see the connection between what they are experiencing in the activity to their work environment. As a group they are able to make the leap and take those learnings with them. It is important to note that the connection back to work must be deliberate and constant if the work teams are to succeed in taking with them and implementing what they have learned. For this reason a good, experienced facilitator is a must.

When to Use Experiential Training

Experiential training is an extremely useful tool, which can be used to greatly impact and improve work teams. Experiential training is especially helpful when implementing work teams, but it is also useful to help resolve conflicts, reinvigorate teams, increase productivity and team member cohesivability. Many consultants and businesses that use experiential training feel comfortable saying that it can be a useful tool for almost any work team or situation.

While experiential training is a wonderful tool, it is easy to get carried away with it. There are pitfalls, which need to be avoided, and so work teams should be on the look out for them when pursuing experiential training. It cannot be emphasized enough that experiential training is not a panacea, it is simply a tool. Teams are not closed systems and should not be viewed or treated as such. A team should never start any form of training without assessing the needs of the team. Never make the assumption that all teams are alike - they are each different and need to be treated as the unique entities that they are. Training is not simply a program; it is a process to be continued after the initial training. Effective training can and will move work teams toward greater effectiveness, but it will not place them there overnight - to expect so is unrealistic.

While experiential training is extremely useful in almost any situation, it is not always the right time to start. An obvious example would be a major merger; since the resulting changes cannot be foreseen the training, would more than likely be wasted. It would also be unwise to begin experiential training if there are extreme tangibles or a very low level of trust and morale. It would seem that this would be the perfect time to begin experiential training, but, according to Price Pritchett, Solomon (1993) it is anything but.

Experiential training makes the assumption that there is at least a moderate existing level of trust. Without a basic level of trust the training will not be developed fully and will more than likely not be carried over into the work environment. In very unstable situations, it is best to let things settle down first. To begin experiential training at that point would only add more kindling to the fire.

Myths of Experiential Training

Robbins (1993) has identified three myths that sometimes surround work teams and experiential training. The myths stem from the beliefs that it is important to stay positive, that resistance is something to be overcome, and that it is best not to become too personal. The following information is based on the work of Robbins (1993 p17-21).

Myth 1: It is important to stay positive

The notion of always being positive has somehow become a perception that people have of experiential training. They believe that it is all hugs and warm fuzzies; while this is a factor it is by no means the whole. By avoiding the negative and focusing solely on the positive, teams only gain half of the training. It is a fact of life that there are no positives without negatives. By focusing on and evaluating the negatives, it is possible to work beyond them to achieve greater things. To ignore the negative by staying positive only serves to hinder a work team.

Myth 2: Resistance is something to be overcome

It is rather simplistic to assume that resistance can simply be overcome. Resistance is a natural part of life and will, in one form or another, play a part in all that we do - including work teams. Resistance can actually be quite useful in that it can raise determination. It also helps to keep things grounded, more realistic and focused. Resistance also helps to protect the establishment, some of which is positive and useful to the team. You cannot force things to happen; resistance will melt on its own in time. In the meantime use it as a tool to produce even greater results.

Myth 3: It is best not to get too personal

This is a common assumption but it is also a false one. When working in a team, it is almost impossible not to become somewhat personal. People are social creatures, and they are going to relate and interact. A work team should have a certain air of familiarity between members, after all, knowing what makes the other team members tick makes working together much easier. As far as experiential training goes, it will not be nearly successful without the team members getting personable - it is all a part of being human and being a team.

In closing I would like to say that I believe experiential training to be a valuable tool capable of assisting most, if not all teams. It can do in a short period of time more than weeks of lectures or videotapes. By actually getting to experience what they are learning

team member have a greater understanding and commitment to what they have learned. Taking the learning back to the work environment is a much easier task when using experiential training. When investigating the possibility of using experiential training, it is important to keep in mind the need for a good facilitator and a program that fits the specific needs of the organization. There are a large numbers of options to choose from in experiential training, choosing one can be difficult, but the right one can help to create strong, productive work teams.

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