

How to run better team building events

Copyright © April 2018, Ian Foster, People Assured.
Contact: ianfoster@peopleassured.com

“Team building is the process of turning a group of individual employees into a cohesive team” (Heathfield, 2016) <https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-team-building-1918270at>

To accomplish a team purpose or goal a group needs to work interdependently and cooperatively.

A team-building event can play an important part in this process, enabling a group to get to know each another better, help them to clarify and align their goals and establish decision-making processes and other norms that will help the team perform better.

Designing and facilitating team-building events over many years, I’ve experienced that event planning and design (pre-event) and follow through (post-event) are key factors in achieving success.

How can you plan for a successful event and outcome?

1. Be able to answer “*Why* are we doing this?” and “*Why now?*”

There should be a clear rationale for holding the event and for when it is held.

The leader/event sponsor should be able to articulate *why* and highlight a couple of key outcomes s/he is hoping for — this drives the team-building design and approach

Examples of “Why”

For a new team this could be to agree and align on team goals, establish ways of working, and to initiate an environment that fosters teamwork. Add in a new team leader, and it can be an additional opportunity for them to showcase their values. For an established team this could be to raise performance — reaffirm what’s working, what’s not and discuss how to overcome obstacles and agree actions on how to take things to the next level. For a team in a business undergoing major change, this could be to re-establish or re-affirm vision and mission and clarify changes in roles, responsibilities and interfaces.

Critically evaluating your team’s starting point and having clear objectives for your event will help you design it in a customized way that will be more impactful.

2. When is the best time to host the event?

Pick a time when your team can give the event their focus and attention. Bringing people together reduces their ability to conduct their day-to-day activities.

If the team is in the midst of key deliverables or a time sensitive activity like year-end, they are less likely to be able to give physical and emotional energy to the event.

Ideally, find a natural transition point for the event (e.g. start of a new initiative, soon after an organizational change or when the majority of a new team's members are in place). This will make sense to the team and provide a better opportunity to use the event as a springboard.

3. How to design the event

Here are 5 ideas on event design:

- Involve a member(s) of the team in the design
- Design to raise individual and team awareness
- Customize for the team and business
- Make it interactive and action-oriented
- Make sure there's follow up/follow through

3.1 *Involve the team in the design*

Involving a member(s) of the team in the design gives the team a greater stake. This doesn't mean having detailed discussions with everyone, but having one or two representatives give their input. It can be helpful to gain early feedback on objectives, topic relevance and how well the activities are likely to be received. It also provides an opportunity to gather business context and develop examples that team members will be able to relate to.

For example, if you have an activity that explores "What's working? What's not?" you could invite team members to provide case studies to illustrate key concepts or challenges they have faced, such as when leading by example, delegating or handling client objections. This 'peer sharing' approach can help new team members or those who have infrequent interaction to quickly assimilate problems and potential solutions.

3.2 *Design to raise individual and team awareness*

How well do you know your team and how well do they understand each another?

Having your team together in one room is a great opportunity for them to learn about others' styles, strengths, and behaviors.

There are numerous self-assessment tools (e.g. DiSC, Social Styles, Myers Briggs, StrengthsFinder) one can use to facilitate awareness around individual and collective styles and strengths. Such assessments can help team members to identify (and then share) whether they are more of a driver, more an expressive type, someone who is more analytical or someone who is accommodating — and where their core strengths lie. The more aware people become of individual preferences, the more effectively they can communicate with their counterparts.

One way to accelerate learning can be to invite function leaders to provide a 10-minute overview of their functional responsibilities and key initiatives, when to involve them and perhaps a key challenge where they need help.

3.3 Customize for the team and business

Tailor your event to your audience's needs — make it timely, business and function relevant and ensure it provides new learning *for your specific audience*.

Reaching out to team leaders can help you identify what might be hot topics for them and how you can involve them during the event. It is important to strike a balance between business-focused activities and those that allow team members to get to know each other in an informal setting. Lunches, dinners and potentially a group outing can serve as a vehicle to allow the group time to get to know each other personally as well as professionally.

A hybrid event that incorporates team-building as part of a broader strategy and planning day is another way to combine business activity with more informal team bonding.

3.4 Make it interactive and action-oriented

One of the best ways to engage your audience is to involve them. Design an event that encourages frequent interaction and have the participants regularly 'do' something.

Techniques to help with this include:

- Plan small group breakouts (4-6 people) to work on brainstorming
- When conducting exercises, ensure each group is made up of a mix (diversity) of leadership styles and functions so that one 'type' doesn't dominate the group
- Call on/draw out as many participants as possible for their thoughts during the course of the event
- Ask questions and invite feedback during each activity
- Have the leader exit the session for a period of time to give more space to their team to come up with suggestions
- Invite a team member(s) to facilitate an activity or present a case study

Equally, make the event manageable. Break up the day into chunks and avoid any long speaker presentations. "Scientists are beginning to identify how long most people can pay attention before they tune out. The range seems to be in the area of 10 to 18 minutes." (Gallo, 2014) <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140313205730-5711504-the-science-behind-ted-s-18-minute-rule/>. If the leader is providing an introduction to the day, suggest they limit it to 10-15 minutes.

Make your event action-oriented to progress issues and opportunities identified by the team. This can be done in a number of ways, for example:

- At the end of each session ask participants to make note of 1 or 2 actions they will personally undertake (self accountability)
- During breakouts ask each group to document actions and nominate someone to lead on each action they have created (group nominated accountability)

- Have an action planning component to the day that captures and consolidates all suggested actions; circulate actions following the workshop and ask each participant to nominate themselves for one action (coordinated action planning)

3.5 Follow up / follow through

Following up after the event will help you establish if you achieved what you set out to do and how to improve future sessions.

Participants can be surveyed for feedback. A debrief with the sponsor and event designer can help you identify what participants thought was valuable and what can be excluded or modified next time.

While many suggestions and actions can come up during an event, following up on them can be challenging once people are back into their day-to-day activity.

Some creative ways to follow up to ensure momentum is not lost:

- Ensure workshop outputs — highlights, ideas, suggestions and actions — are circulated to the team shortly after the event
- Agree a time when actions can be reviewed e.g. as an agenda item at the next leadership team meeting
- Arrange for a couple of members of the team to review all actions after the event, filter (prioritize) them and identify the best way to follow up (e.g. team meeting, through ongoing projects etc.)
- Schedule a 3-month check in with the team leader to revisit key discussion points and gain feedback on how things have moved forward

In summary, with more effective planning, design and follow up you have a better chance of engaging your team during team-building and achieving the performance results and enhanced relationships you seek.

References:

1. Heathfield, S.M., *What is team building*, The Balance, Human Resources/HR Glossary, August 26, 2016 <https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-team-building-1918270>
2. Gallo, C., *The science behind TED's 18-minute rule*, LinkedIn pulse, March 13, 2014 <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140313205730-5711504-the-science-behind-ted-s-18-minute-rule/>