Energizes and Motivates

Photo courtesy of Donna Collins, Total Event Resources, Chicago, IL

Meetings offer great opportunity for teambuilding activities
Breaks down barriers and improves collaboration

"Coming together is a beginning.
Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success."
- Henry Ford

As meeting planners think about building their agendas for future events, they may want to consider teambuilding exercises as a part of their program.

Meetings are the perfect place to "energize" and "motivate" people, according to Steve Proudman of the Proudman Group, Inc. (www.proudmangroup.com) of Chicago, IL, which specializes in experiential (teambuilding) programming. "Face-to-face meetings are powerful ways to build trust, understand, share and celebrate with the people we call colleagues, customers or associates," he said.

Collaboration and understanding the value of teamwork often shakes out during teambuilding exercises at meetings. Through motivation and communication, people experience each other and learn through activity why "we" instead of "me" is so valuable to an organization.

Whether it is pitting extroverts against introverts in friendly and competitive mind-building games or performing a community service function like bike building to aid a Boys and Girls Club, these exercises not only can break the ice at a meeting but they can contribute to a person's self-esteem and the value of teamwork.

"Meetings are key to keeping business moving forward," said

TEAMBUILDING

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Donna Collins, who is in her tenth year at Total Event Resources (www.total-event.com) of Chicago, IL. "Meetings are people and people make business. Face-to-face meetings with colleagues and clients, where you can interact, engage in dialogue, solve problems, and create goals are all essential to the healthy growth of business and the people that drive the business," she said.

In difficult times, as businesses across America are experiencing now, finding ways to improve collaboration and teamwork is especially critical, given the fact that staff sizes are decreasing and increased responsibility is the result.

"Fear and uncertainty can paralyze a workforce," said Proudman. "Watching friends get laid off, making sacrifices to stay employed can be emotionally difficult to accept. And, in today's world, difficult times are the norm. Morale is critical to staying positive," he said.

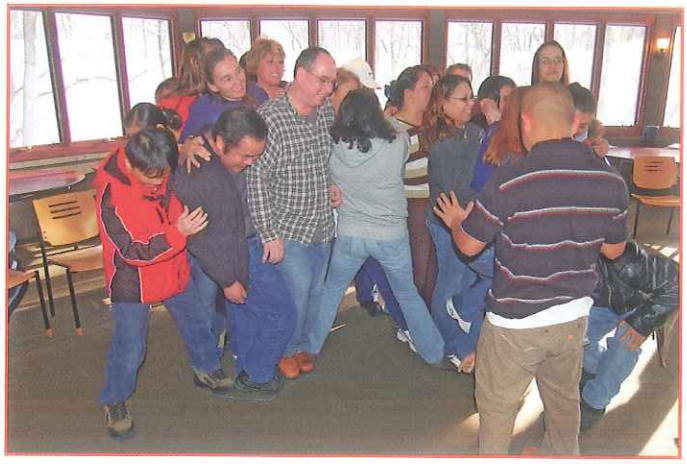

Photo courtesy of Steve Proudman, Proudman Group, Inc.

In trying economic times, motivation of employees takes on greater significance, according to Collins. "They still need to be educated on what they are selling and they still need to be celebrated for the milestones along the way, whether big or small," she said.

According to Collins, experiential learning can provide at least four benefits, including:

- Investing in people
- Reinforcing learning in a fun, interactive way
- Building camaraderie among attendees, employees and teams
- Strengthening relationships

"People learn more deeply when they experience the message as opposed to just hearing it or seeing it on a screen," she said.

Plus, attendees are able to strengthen their skills individually and collectively. Experiential learning also helps people think about how they are performing on the job, and even better, it gives them the opportunities to "think outside the box which initiates creative thinking," she said.

Strong evidence by the Six Seconds network shows that boosting morale and building a positive mindset can contribute to "a healthier, more productive workplace," said Proudman.

The Six Seconds network, which has certified associates in 50 nations, advocates the value of emotional intelligence (EQ), a set of practical, measurable life skills, which can be learned and will help people at work and home.

"Like any other kind of intelligence, anyone can improve their emotional intelligence with practice and self-awareness development. People with strong EQ skills, exhibit high degrees of empathy, are genuinely optimistic, have a strong grasp of their emotions and what triggers them, can recognize patterns of emotional response and are conscious of how their emotions affect their relationships," said Proudman, who has been certified in EQ for executive retreat settings and leadership development programs.

While these experts agree that teambuilding can make a difference in the productivity of people and organizations, the type of teambuilding exercise should be designed to fit a particular organization.

Proudman said thoughtful planning creates a meeting program that includes quality time for renewal and reenergizing as well as learning. "Teambuilding, when done well, is a process that can move a meeting beyond the ordinary and into a lasting memory, much like a really good story," he said.

"I believe that adults like to have fun in a meeting environment and not just at happy hour," said Proudman. "Having fun can be framed in a serious setting of participative learning. Teambuilding supports the need for a client group to hold a meeting that is engaging for everyone, is inspiring, and increases morale and joy of working together for a common goal," said Proudman.

According to Collins, her company asks clients six questions in designing the right program for their meeting or in-house program. They ask clients questions pertaining to who, what, when, where, how and why.

First, Total Event Resources quizzes clients on who the group is trying to reach. They then ask, what is the message a group is trying to convey, including goals and objectives. Next, they ask how a

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Photo courtesy of Donna Collins, Total Event Resources, Chicago, IL

client wants to convey their message.

"People learn differently at all times of the day," she said. "So, we ask a group if they have an optimal time for learning," said Collins.

In addition, they ask clients about the location of the program. Fourth, in dealing with the where, it is important to know if a group will use an existing program, work environment or a specially designed location to reach the focus group, according to Collins.

The fifth question, the how, involves the way an activity is designed and whether it is physical or involves adventure, music, art, comedy or some other characteristic. The how, she said, also includes dealing with a group's budget. And, finally, planning includes asking why.

"At the meeting, your objective should include identifying opportunities for the attendees to reinforce the good and learning something that takes them to the next level. Whether it's something about your company, services, product, colleagues, clients, never stop learning," said Collins.

Proudman noted that good teambuilding programs are more than a bunch of fun activities. "The quality of the facilitators and the knowledge and integrity of the design are more important than what the activities entail," he said. "Calculating how much time is spent sitting and listening vs. moving and interacting is important to bear in mind," said Proudman, noting that he takes into consideration the history of the client and what programs they have done in the past.

So, what kinds of teambuilding exercises are popular?

According to Collins, current trends in teambuilding are mirroring reality TV. She said that teambuilding exercises like scavenger hunts are being turned into something like the show the "Amazing Race." She said "American Idol" has affected the culture and the way experiential learning is conducted. She also notes that cooking shows also are part of exercises at conferences through group gatherings such as grilling contests, etc.

Maris Brenner of Kalahari Resort in Sandusky, OH, said teambuilding exercises are gaining momentum in programming at meetings on the Kalahari property. Because of the Safari Adventure Park and the waterpark, groups can do various things from water basketball to pizza creation to drumming, in which attendees show their spirit and creativity on African drums. "It always starts that people are very shy and nobody wants to show their spirit and by the end of the program, you see how competitive they can get. It is really rather amazing," she said.

Increasingly, meeting planners are focusing on socially responsible activities with a community-minded purpose.

Community service functions include building a playground; painting walls of a school; adopting a family and helping them prepare for school by donating clothes, school supplies, as well as building bikes for children; building toys donated to Boys and Girls Clubs; painting murals for display in children's hospitals; and donating time to help out at nursing homes, according to Collins.

Ed Graziano, founder of Corporate Event Interactive (www.corpevent.com) in Chicago, IL, also suggested that cause-related tie-ins really are appealing to groups and their benefactors.

"The kids that actually receive the items take away a tremendous gift from what these attendees build," said Graziano. "I think when you see the appreciation that they show then you get the warm and fuzzy feeling. We have to remember for some there is some trepidation and shyness. But when you see their amazement of the moment, it is memorable. And for some, their reactions are not spoken but what is registered on their faces."

Regardless of the programs, benefits for the attendees include building trust, improving communication skills, and improving self-awareness skills. And, the interplay between people can never be undervalued.

"You can't discount the value of interaction between people," said Graziano. "It makes an impact on what they accomplished and how. The attendees build something and the giveback is what we

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see, and truly drives home the value of these experiences," he said.

In business, as with people, change is constant. It is why teambuilding can truly open attendees' eyes to the immediate world around them. They can't walk into a teambuilding exercise on demand but what they learn will help them adjust to what needs to happen when they get back home to the office.

According to Collins, it seems that everything needs to be measured by its return on investment. But what isn't calculated, as heavily is the return that people provide. "Everyone in every organization has ideas. A business that is open to learning good ideas, no matter where they come from, will continue to grow. Teambuilding activities often break down barriers and allow opportunities in a non-threatening way to talk, to listen to each other, and to the exchange of ideas," said Collins.

"When clients' attendees come away from an experiential activity feeling more cohesive, they emerge stronger as a team," Collins said. "Stronger teams equate to their continued buy-in and investment in the future of the organization. Stronger teams mean stronger organizations, typically equating to success."

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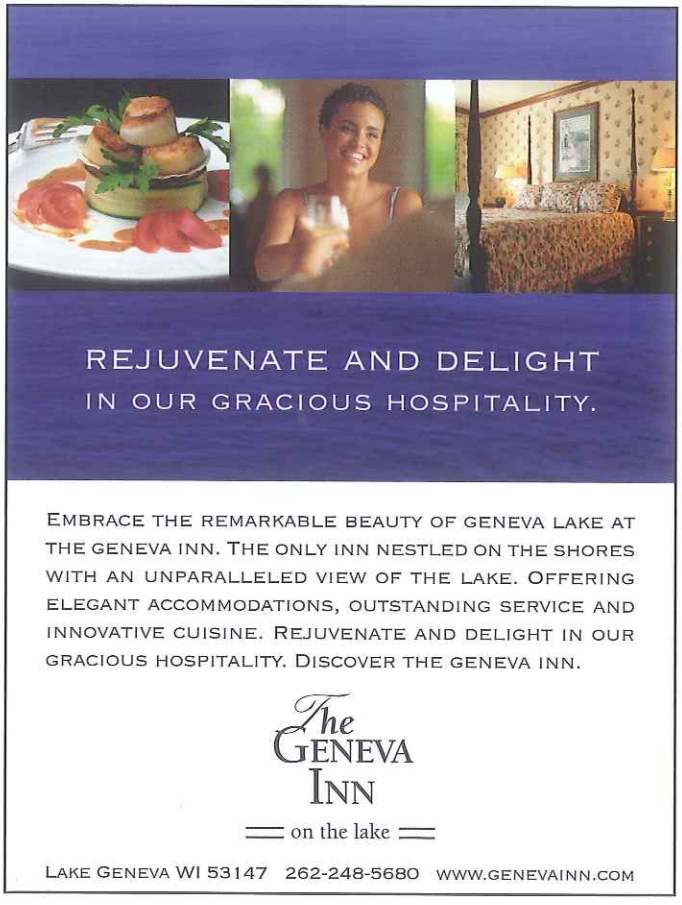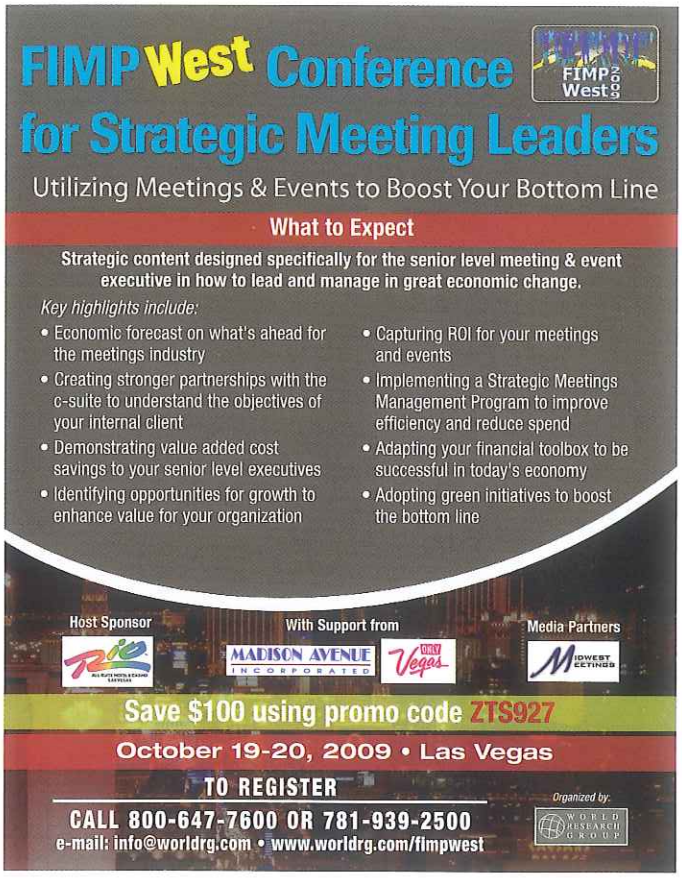
"People tend to grow and change just as businesses evolve," said Proudman. "Regardless of where a business is on its journey, whether it is a start up, recently merged, in a downturn, in rapid expansion, small or global in scale and scope, people are what constitutes success."