



Let your group's imagination run rampant in the Mambo Room at Catalyst Ranch.

Get Creative!

FROM PLAY-DOH TO SORTING FOOD, THIS IS TEAM BUILDING IN CHICAGO. BY BELINDA LICHTY CLARKE

OFTEN, THE BEST IDEAS HAPPEN WHEN employees are away from their desks. Usually, it's up to meeting planners to find the best off-site locations to get those creative juices flowing. From team building meetings to off-site corporate brainstorming sessions, finding the right learning environment is the key to success.

At Catalyst Ranch in Chicago's south Loop, no stone is left unturned when it comes to tapping employee energy and creativity. The space itself is a sight for the senses with soft

furniture, non-conventional workspace, lofted ceilings and natural light and bright colors throughout. And whether you bring in your own facilitators, or you tap Catalyst Ranch's

stable of team-building pros, you'll have access to a cache of brain-boosting gadgets you probably won't find anywhere else. Planners can choose from a list of accoutrement that includes things such as Play-Doh, wigs, puppets, rubber noses and hoola-hoops. Of course there are white boards too, and the requisite flip charts, but you can bet the ideas generated at Catalyst Ranch are not the same you'd see in a breakout room at an airport hotel.

According to Bobbie Soeder, explorer, matchmaker and vice president of sales and marketing at Catalyst Ranch, it's the unique environment that sets their facility apart. "The environment is created to take meeting goers to 'another place' in their minds," Soeder says. "With all the nostalgic furnishings and games,



one's mind goes back to a place when creativity was free and spontaneous."

Soeder adds that finding the right facilitator is important because, she says, a highly trained facilitator can provide the special tools. Soeder says that Catalyst Ranch provides recommendations for facilitators based on her team's experience of knowing their strengths and talents, or by another corporate client's shared recommendation. "A few of our recommended facilitators also incorporate unique elements such as improv training and art to workout challenges," Soeder says. "The environment is sometimes called 'magical' because it works in the bonding process it takes to create good teams."

Catalyst Ranch works to pair the right facilitator with your group to ensure the perfect match.

TEAM BUILDING WITH A MISSION

In 2006 and 2007, the Windy City Fieldhouse was voted best team building facility by *Illinois Meeting & Events* readers. With an extensive "menu" of team-building and business skills-building opportunities for corporate groups, and a location just 10 minutes north of the

Win-Win

TEAM BUILDING AT THE GREATER CHICAGO FOOD DEPOSITORY IMPROVES MORALE

There are unique team-building venues, and then there is the Greater Chicago Food Depository, a 268,000-square-foot facility on the southwest side of the city that distributes donated and purchased food through a network of 600 food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters to approximately 500,000 adults and children every year. For companies looking to mix business with volunteering, the Food Depository gives corporate groups access to help sort food. The work can be done in conjunction with a meeting (which can be held on-site at one of the Food Depository's classroom-style meeting rooms) or as a separate charitable team-building activity. There's even space to bring in take-out for lunch or dinner, depending on the session chosen.

"We have seen how corporate philanthropy helps improve office morale and creates a vibrant corporate culture," says Ruth Igoe, director of communications for the Greater Chicago Food Depository. "One very tangible way that corporations can make a difference through their giving is by having a group volunteer. We can accommodate about 120 people on a Saturday and about 100 people during the week."

For more information on corporate volunteering, contact the Greater Chicago Food Depository at 773.247.3663 and ask for someone in the volunteer services department.



Loop, owner Murrel Karsh says the key is working with the meeting planner to identify up front the mission and objectives for the event. Whether it's a corporate team building exercise or a company picnic that welcomes families, setting specific goals makes all the difference.

For example, Karsh says, when planners come to his firm to help plan a company picnic and he asks them what they want to achieve, the standard answer is, "I want everyone to have a good time." But Karsh suggests even for something social, you can identify a mission, for example, "I want to enhance relationships and build goodwill with employees and their families." What you do at the event is even more important, adds Karsh.

"It's not enough to provide inflatable toys and a picnic lunch because you run the risk of alienating a good portion of your demographic if you've got younger employees without kids," Karsh says. "You also need to offer specific events that are engaging for the guests."

From "Amazing Race"-type programs and "Mission Impossible" scavenger hunts to the "Team Challenge" exercise that incorporates critical strategy, communication and teamwork, the Windy City Fieldhouse is a soup-to-nuts operation that brings employees on site

(this page and opposite page)
Groups work together to complete "Puzzling Planks," part of the Team Challenge at Windy City Fieldhouse.

"DUMMY" DOWN YOUR MEETING PLAN

For planners, managers and team leaders who want to learn more about corporate team building and what makes an effective problem-solving environment, it helps to do a little bedside reading. But who has the time? That's where the "Dummies" books come in, and *Managing Teams for Dummies* (For Dummies, 1st Edition), authored by management consultant Marty Brounstein, offers succinct and to-the-point information about how to achieve group goals, overcome challenges and provide the skills necessary to work more effectively. The book includes cheat sheets, checklists and a "dash of fun and humor."



to its 55,000-square-foot facility or to numerous hotels and resorts with whom the Windy City Fieldhouse has partnerships.

And while Karsh admits that it's impossible to revolutionize employee behavior in the course of one day, the results are real. Better still, because of the nature of the activities, employees might not even realize that the exercises they're participating in are actually helping develop better business and communications skills.

"The exercises we do are so fun—and so competitive—that we've been asked by hotel staffers to keep the noise level down," Karsh says. What he can ensure planners, or managers, is that they will "see tangible change the next day in the business setting." From something as seemingly small as a manager asking a colleague to repeat a set of instructions back for clarity or an employee asking his manager to better explain a project, it's these types of "skills" that are developed during the course of a fun team-building exercise. **LD**

* IN TOUCH

CATALYST RANCH

Chicago / 312.207.1710 / www.catalystranch.com

GREATER CHICAGO FOOD DEPOSITORY

Chicago / 773.247.3663 / www.chicagosfoodbank.org

WINDY CITY FIELDHOUSE

Chicago / 773.486.7403 / www.windycityfieldhouse.com