

# Work, jest and play

Team building is more than just paintballing and trips to the pub, says Richard Schofield

Like *Wikipedia's* definition that a team “*comprises a group of people or animals linked in a common purpose*”. It reminds me of an ice-breaker I once used where team members identified each other as animals. It got a bit out of hand when one person was labelled as a snake... not exactly a good start to team building (that exercise was dropped very quickly).

*Wikipedia's* definition goes further: teamwork is “*a joint action by three people or more or a group of people, in which each person subordinates his or her individual interests and opinions to the unity and efficiency of the group. The most effective teamwork is produced when all the individuals involved harmonise their contributions and work towards a common goal.*”

I'm sure we have all seen how destructive 'animal' behaviour can be in project teams. Wherever it is necessary to bring individuals together to achieve a specific goal, it's clear that the interaction between people, and how effectively they work together, affects the end result. Perhaps the most important example of this can be seen in the military where lives depend on trust, understanding and clear communication.

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Teams can be formed in various ways: from one or more parts of an organisation, from separate organisations or from a mix of 'internal' and 'external' resources. Some say that single-organisation teams should always perform well as members already share a common base, but experience shows us that many large organisations suffer from detrimental internal conflicts.

Teams of members from separate organisations need to address differences in their 'organisational cultures' and find ways of dealing with potential cultural conflicts. This is particularly evident in a team of internal and external resources, e.g. in public/private-sector joint ventures.

On construction projects, teams are assembled with experts from specific disciplines to work with a client to plan, design and deliver a building that meets the client's needs. The diversity of members demonstrates the importance of getting team building right.

So what then *is* team building? The first step in team building should be team 'assembly' and project teams should be assembled from people:

- with the appropriate technical skills
- with the time to devote to the project
- who will work effectively within a collaborative environment.

This may sound obvious but it is not unknown for teams to be cobbled together without consideration of these basic parameters – often with expensive results.

As project managers, we are often in a position to influence the selection process. While corporate knowledge, experience and support are important (as is cost), more emphasis should be placed on the individuals proposed and a formal interview should be a part of the process.

There's no real need for a Belbin test as I believe we can trust our instincts and tell who will make a good team member, or not, within the first few minutes of an interview.

What do I look for? Confidence without being brash, enthusiasm, communication skills and, above all, humour. Could you spend two or more years working with technically good but miserable and shy people?

Once the team is selected, it is not a given that they will all work together, and that's where team 'building' comes in.

### Don't gamble

Putting a group of people together and expecting them to automatically work well as a team is a gamble. But we've done this for years. Only recently have we realised the importance of starting a new project and new team with some form of coming together to create a common vision, identify barriers and share ownership.

This is not just about bringing the technical team members together, as most projects now involve extended teams that include the client, end users and other key stakeholders. All members of this extended team must feel 'part' of the project and be comfortable in contributing at all stages, including expressing concerns at the right time (see *Crucial Conversations\**).

So do we all need to go off paintballing or maybe head down to the pub to build our team spirit?

That's your call, but I feel that most people in our industry, including our clients, prefer to do practical things that relate to the project. A well-structured and facilitated workshop at the start of a project can provide a good forum for introductions and building relationships, while developing important elements of the project, e.g. its brief, outline programme, strategic risk register, etc. This first workshop is also vital to ensure a clear understanding of each others' roles and concerns.

Build in plenty of breaks to provide informal chat time as well as structured group working where you can 'mix up' new team members and gently 'force' them to get to know their new colleagues. This initial workshop will also allow you to see how individuals interact and you should be able to spot any potential problems/personality clashes that might need urgent attention.

# TEAM BUILD 2009

Watch out for those who don't contribute and seem unwilling to 'open up'. They may be shy and need coaching, but if that is their style, do you really want them on your team? Also be aware of the potential divisive types who can dominate discussions and who can easily destroy team spirit.

Maintaining team spirit requires work, especially on long-term projects and 'refresher' workshops or activities should be programmed in on a regular basis. Watch for people slipping into old habits and deal quickly with personal rifts.

Problems will arise on all projects and the team will be tested when things get rough. But if you have assembled the right team and built them into a cohesive, collaborative unit with the right support and guidance, they should be ready to face whatever happens and overcome all obstacles together.

## Top tips for successful team building

- Allow time at the start and create opportunities for people to get to know each other and build working relationships. This is especially important on long-term projects. Social events are useful, but keep them under control
- Ensure there is universal understanding and commitment to the project's vision, aims and objectives. Don't assume everyone knows them. Write them down and keep them visible
- Identify cultural differences and 'baggage' that people may bring. At the first workshop, ask people to write down what they think will be the barriers to effective teamwork on the project. Debate openly and agree solutions
- Efficient, effective and harmonious teams do not carry passengers. Make sure everyone pulls their weight. Deal swiftly with non-team players
- Build in regular 'refresher' team workshops to review the previous period, discuss what has gone well and what hasn't. Encourage open debate and 'air clearing'. Agree improvements and set an action plan that can be monitored and reviewed at the next workshop.

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\*Construction Journal articles on Crucial Conversations can be found on [www.rics.org/journals](http://www.rics.org/journals)



Related competencies include: T063, SP002

## Shaping tomorrow's professionals

Collaboration between team members is critical, particularly between the professionals. However, our industry has largely ignored people skills and the need for inter-disciplinary collaboration.

In 1992, this situation led consulting engineer Richard Rooley to found Teambuild, a national competition for young professionals under 30 who compete in nine mixed-discipline teams over an intensive weekend of practical challenges based on real projects. Judging and support is from senior representatives of the major professional institutions and livery companies. Teambuild relies heavily on this continued support and their commitment to the training and development of the UK's young professionals.

Teams go through a pre-qualification process and have to present their project masterplans in advance of the competition. The teams should include an architect, civil engineer, services engineer, quantity surveyor, contractor and a project manager. Previous teams have also included a landscape architect and a lawyer.

Teambuild is a competition aimed at the best young professionals in our industry. Teams learn they must identify a leader, list the tasks against the timescale and allocate resources. Communication is critical and everyone must participate – there are no passengers.

We have learned a lot from our Teambuild experience. Using actual projects for the exercise gives the process reality – without games or embarrassing activities. Competitors have also asked for more social time to get to know each other, which recognises the importance of building relationships – a vital part of any team-building activity.

The deadline for registering interest in the 2009 Teambuild competition is 14 August with the finals weekend taking place on 20-22 November at Eynsham Hall, Oxfordshire.

For further information, visit [www.teambuilduk.com](http://www.teambuilduk.com)



The 2008 Teambuild winners at work