

CASE STUDY

Real Solutions to HR Questions

Horsing around may help strengthen teams

Not another team-building meeting! Oftentimes, such meetings are regarded as both tiresome and boring to employees. So, maybe it's time to try something innovative, something a little off the beaten path. Maybe an activity like horseback riding to help with team building. Sounds a little too off-the-wall? Well, according to Ellen Massena, vice president/business relationship manager of Union Bank of California, trying something different may be just the ticket you need to develop the skills for real team building.

"Doing something really unorthodox helps you learn to respond more quickly to unpredictable changes. Whether you are riding a horse or kayaking down a river, it creates the unexpected," says Massena, who went through Union Bank's team-building program twice; once with other executives and once with a group of financial lending employees. "And that's something we all need to learn how to cope with, because at work, you get the unexpected every day. You may have your planner and your agenda right there in front of you, but that doesn't stop a crisis from happening right then."

'City Slickers'

The program Massena went through for team building was called Saddle Sojourns, based in Valley Center, California. Here each participant is paired with a horse that fits

the person's personality and style, and then each group works together to perform certain tasks. Tasks include reaching a common goal, such as dropping three rings over a cone or traveling from Point A to Point B. Each goal is different and requires a different set of skills for completion. In addition, the same person is not allowed to participate in two consecutive activities so that everyone on the team gets a chance to be actively engaged.

Why horses?

Massena admits that her first impression when she heard about working with horses was not very positive. "I'm not really much of a horse lover," she admits. "Actually, I'm a little intimidated by them." But by the time she was finished with the training, she had gained a great deal of confidence in herself and her abilities, noting that she felt as though she could accomplish anything. But still, why horses?

"Working with horses," says Massena, "requires moment-to-moment communication and trust. We had to respond quickly to unpredictable changes, as the horses would often behave in ways we didn't expect. That was a real mirror to work and life itself."

Each participant is carefully teamed with a specific horse, and all are given training in how to handle their horses. Team members are given a personality test to determine which horse would be best for them. They were paired with horses that would help them see their strengths and help them develop in the areas they were looking to develop. For instance, in Massena's case, they gave her a horse named Drifless, because she tends to be very outgoing and positive. Another woman there, who is very analytical, was given a horse that was slower and more sure-footed.

Riding horses also meant that you got everyone out of the office into a beautiful setting, so you are out of your work environment, giving you an opportunity to know your co-workers in a different light. And, says Massena, it really made a difference. "Someone who you always think of as quiet in the office can come out here and be really adept at not only accomplishing the goals, but also helping organize everyone to get the tasks done. You just see a whole different side of them."

More than horseback riding

The exercises revealed several things to the group, says Massena: "First, we got to learn a lot about ourselves and each of the other participants, in terms of communication, learning, and conflict styles. This is something that is not always clear when we are in our normal work roles. And because it all depended on how we worked as a team to accomplish our goals, we also learned that there is not necessarily one right way to accomplish a goal."

The second thing the exercises taught the group was that they had to pay constant attention to their actions and the results they produced.

Finally, notes Massena, to perform the challenges, "all teammates had to be participants, a point that we all took back with us not only to the workplace but also to our personal lives as well." —*mw*

Helpful Hint

- If you decide to try an unusual training opportunity, check the credentials of the people running it. You want to make certain you and your employees not only will be in the hands of professionals in terms of the activity, but also in terms of professional development.
- Encourage employees who may be skeptical or a little uncertain about the activity. But do remember that some activities may be asking too much of employees. If they are really frightened or worried, you may want to go with a less stress-producing activity.

TIP

Massena says that one of the best parts of the training was that they didn't just go over the personality test results and leave it there. Instead, as a group, they discussed how each of their personalities interact with other personalities, and they discussed strategies for working together.