

The End of Team Building?

By Charlie Lang, Managing Partner of Progress-U Asia



It's fun. It's (often) expensive. It tends to achieve something.

But is it worth it? Is it the best investment for what you want to or need to achieve?

Team building had developed over the past decades into a sizable industry. There tend to be typically two general types of team building: indoor and more adventure-oriented outdoor programs. The formats, contents and delivery vary from provider to provider and so does the quality of these programs.

Typically, the most common expected outcomes for team building include:

- Stronger bonding of team members
- Energized and motivated team members, resulting to better cooperation
- Better buy-in and understanding of the idea of team work

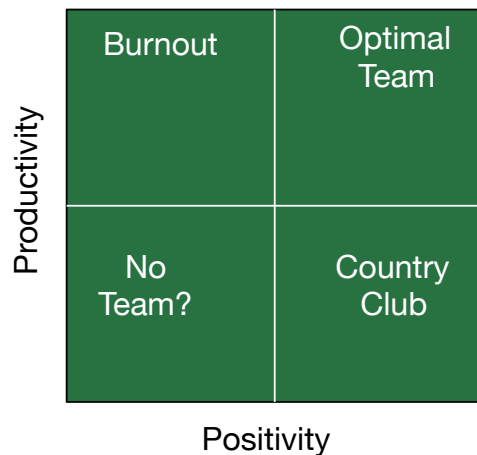
While most team building programs tend to achieve these objectives at least to some extent, the question is if this is the most effective approach to achieve it? And how does team building fare when it comes to dysfunctional teams?

What is the alternative?

In Asia, team coaching started to gain traction around 2010. Increasingly, progressive organizations realize the high impact of team coaching, especially with their top management teams.

How does it work?

Unlike in 1:1 or group coaching, very specific and innovative team coaching tools are deployed to achieve pre-defined outcomes with the ultimate purpose of increasing team productivity and/or team positivity.



For example, the top management team of the Asia headquarters of a larger European kitchenware company was experiencing a lot of conflicts, especially between three of their nine team members. They went for a team building activity and things seemed to improve at first, but within less than a month from that event, things were back to square one.

John, the leader of the team decided to give it another try, this time with team coaching. As a first step, the team coach had 1:1 meetings with each of the team members including its leaders to gain everyone’s perspective but also to prepare them for the team coaching day.

On team coaching day, one of the first activities was for the team members to work out the team purpose. Then, the team coach applied the team coaching tool ‘The 4 Poisons of a Team’ (Defensiveness, Blaming, Stonewalling, Putting Others Down). Each team member had to position himself close to a marker representing the poison she/he felt was most apparent in this team. Then every team member had to explain why they chose that poison and what made them say it is happening in the team, without pointing fingers to anyone or naming anyone. Then every team member had to walk around the four poisons again and stand close to the poison that they feel, if eradicated, would be most beneficial for the team. Each team member including the

team leader had to make a specific commitment on what they will do to prevent this poison from affecting the team. These commitments were journaled and followed up about four to five weeks after the team coaching day. Team members journaled their commitments and followed up after four to five weeks. Some other team coaching tools were applied to further improve productivity and positivity of the team.

During the follow-up session, all team members, especially the team leader agreed that conflicts significantly reduced and that ever since the team coaching day, they have enjoyed working with each other much more. Not everything was perfect, of course, but the change was significant.

For team coaching to work effectively, it requires

- A very capable and courageous team coach
- A solid assessment of what's happening
- A systematic process (a one-off 1-day event usually doesn't cut it)
- Effective team coaching tools that make it more likely for everyone to speak up in a respectful manner

Team coaching well done has a very high return on investment, something that can't always be said for team building. More importantly, while team building might work well as a 'wellness program' for any team (and there is nothing wrong with wellness), it tends to not really resolve deeper lying issues or dysfunctions in a team. Team coaching has proven to be able to address such issues and to achieve lasting change.

Let's keep progressing!

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