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For Team-Building Events, a New Ingredient: Fun

Popular Themes Tap Into Popular Culture—and Offbeat Activities

MANY HANDS | Cooking without recipes forces groups to adapt on the fly. *BRIAN C. MORRISON*

By **TODDI GUTNER**

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It's no secret that some people find team-building exercises, well, alienating.

While big, far-flung organizations still use team building in attempts to improve communication and camaraderie, many who participate end up wishing everyone had just stayed at their desks. In a 2012 survey of more than 1,000 office workers by Wakefield Research, commissioned by Citrix, nearly one-third said they had attended team builders that either weren't in line with company culture or that put employees in embarrassing or uncomfortable situations.

In response, many organizers have embraced new strategies to make team builders more engaging. No one wants to play long and boring games designed to educate employees about company processes or culture, the new thinking goes. Favored events now include cooking classes, learning to ice-sculpt, fencing and even donning fat suits for sumo wrestling.

The new kinds of team-building events, many of which tap into pop culture, are much more likely to engage reluctant participants, and are better tailored to different corporate cultures, says David Goldstein, chief operating officer of TeamBonding, a Chicago-based company that organizes team-building events.

No Recipes

Mr. Goldstein's company, for example, arranged a cooking exercise for Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., a maker of laboratory equipment based in Waltham, Mass. Some 25 managers from around the world, coming together for a week of meetings, on the first

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night were divided into five teams. Each team was assigned to make a course for dinner within a set time. The teams were told what to make, and whether it was an appetizer, an entree or dessert. The ingredients were all laid out. But there were no recipes.

To make *spanakopita*, a savory Greek spinach pie, Ronald J. O'Brien, director of public relations for Thermo Fisher Scientific, says his team had to assimilate and understand one another's personalities quickly. "We were all leaders," Mr. O'Brien says, "and the process highlighted the differences in the way we all approach a situation, which person would be in charge and how work would be delegated."

Sometimes team-building events are one of the few times that remote colleagues come together. Other times, team builders take colleagues who work together all of the time

and show them something new about one another.

Big Sandbox

Superior Farms Inc., a lamb producer and distributor based in Davis, Calif., was looking for a new team-building idea for its 11 senior executives when it found Dig This, a company in Las Vegas that bills itself as a "heavy equipment playground." Co-workers doing team building there take the controls of heavy construction equipment to accomplish customized team missions.

Operating an excavator, which tends to be a new experience for everyone, put Karen Ellis way out of her comfort zone. Ms. Ellis, the Superior Farms vice president of human resources, says that if it weren't for the specific directions that her team partner spoke calmly and encouragingly into her headset, she wouldn't have been able to do her part for her team.

"He was so patient with me and knew exactly what I needed to hear," says Ms. Ellis, adding that it gave her a fresh perspective on someone she works with every day.

what's happening in pop culture, including doing things for charities and nonprofits. Jibe Consulting, a management and technology company in Lake Oswego, Ore., chose an activity created by Wildly Different, a team-building company based in Orlando, Fla.

Some 70 Jibe employees were split into teams of 10, which assembled and decorated little red wagons, then completed various tasks to win toys and fill up their wagons. Teams that have the best-decorated wagon and acquire the most toys win award medals.

"To see an IT guy stand up and hum a tune for us to guess the song showed me a whole new personal side of him," says Melissa Humes, Jibe's HR director.

"But the best part about the event," she adds, "was having the Ronald McDonald House come in and take all the wagons for the kids."

Ms. Gutner is a writer in Chappaqua, N.Y. She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

Corrections & Amplifications

Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc. is a maker of laboratory equipment based in Waltham, Mass. An earlier version of this article incorrectly called it a global pharmaceutical and biotech company.



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