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# Team Efforts

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## Creative team-building exercises help employees work better—together

**W**hen you play catch with chain saws, flaming batons and sharpened sickles, you'd better trust whoever's throwing.

It's that sort of trust that comedic jugglers Jon Wee and Owen Morse aim to foster among a company's colleagues in their team-building exercises for corporate clients. Wee and Morse run a company called The Passing Zone, which boasts a client list that includes Domino's Pizza, Frito-Lay, Boeing and MCI. At corporate events, The Passing Zone teaches teams of co-workers to juggle, starting with the most basic step: throwing and catching one ball and then building upon that concept. (Don't worry: Clients aren't expected to juggle anything dangerous.)

According to both Morse and Wee, juggling is an apt metaphor for business and life. "Everyone feels as if they have too many balls in the air, and trying to balance all of the many facets of life and work is complicated work," explains Wee. "So really, we're all jugglers."

The concept of team-building events at corporate conferences and meetings isn't new. But, lately, the exercises used to foster better collaboration inside businesses have become more innovative as companies have sought to take employees farther outside their comfort zones and into the realm of more creative, competitive teamwork.

According to Ben Dattner, principal of Dattner Consulting and a professor of Industrial and Organizational Psychology

The Passing Zone's Jon Wee (left) and Owen Morse teach team-building principles through juggling.

at New York University, "Teams are increasingly popular in the workplace as tasks become too complex for any one individual to master." Organizations are realizing that a great source of competitive advantage is how well they can manage their human capital and create effective teams, says Dattner. "When teams are performing at their best, their outputs can far exceed the sum of the parts."

When team building is successful, it fosters collaboration, communication, morale and creative thinking, and reduces turf wars. Almost any fun, interactive activity can produce results, but the best ones get employees "to understand each other in the context of what their responsibilities are," and help develop skills and an understanding of "communication, taking risks and recovering from mistakes," says The Passing Zone's Wee.

**Take, for example,** team-building challenges offered by F1 Race Factory in



COURTESY: SYNCOPATE; (TOP RIGHT) COURTESY: LOEWS CORONADO BAY RESORT & SPA



Above: At Loews Coronado Bay Resort & Spa in Coronado, California, exercises led by former Navy SEALs strengthen team bonds.

Left: Los Angeles-based Syncopate helps team members connect by teaching them to compose music together.

Phoenix, a 113,000-square-foot indoor kart-racing and conference venue. According to president and owner Scott Sanders, the venue's "F1 Olympics" program is designed to "supercharge teams with adrenaline-based activities that combine strategy, teamwork, communication and, of course, fun."

The program combines four events involving groups of 25 to more than 300. Events include an interactive team-trivia contest tailored to the company's business; a climbing challenge up a 24-foot-tall rock wall; and the Phoenix International Raceway Pit Crew Challenge. "The [Challenge] uses a real (stationary) NASCAR for a 'timed pit stop' where all four tires are changed using airguns, jacks and plenty of teamwork to complete the stop within the safety parameters," Sanders says. The program ends with a race in European-style race karts (designed to go up to 45 MPH) on one of two indoor quarter-mile tracks.

The key to creating a valuable team-building experience, Sanders says, is to make it uniquely memorable. "Producing a team-building program that will be talked

about for weeks and months to come extends the positive effects of the experience in the workplace. Racing is emotional, and it is the emotional tie to an event at F1 Race Factory that can provide a common bond to employees to band together to meet deadlines or work through difficult problems."

Other creative concepts for team building run the gamut. A Los Angeles-based company called Lights, Camera, Interaction places team members into the roles of director, actors, writers and camera operators, and then has them film a 60-second commercial for their company. And, over in Coronado, California, at Loews Coronado Bay Resort & Spa, corporate team-building events include training exercises led by former Navy SEALs. On the lighter side, the resort has also hosted corporate sand-sculpture competitions, sailing regattas and beach Olympics, all in the name of team building.

So, what's the difference between true team-building exercises and simple feel-good, let-your-hair-down activities? Just how fine is the line between the two?

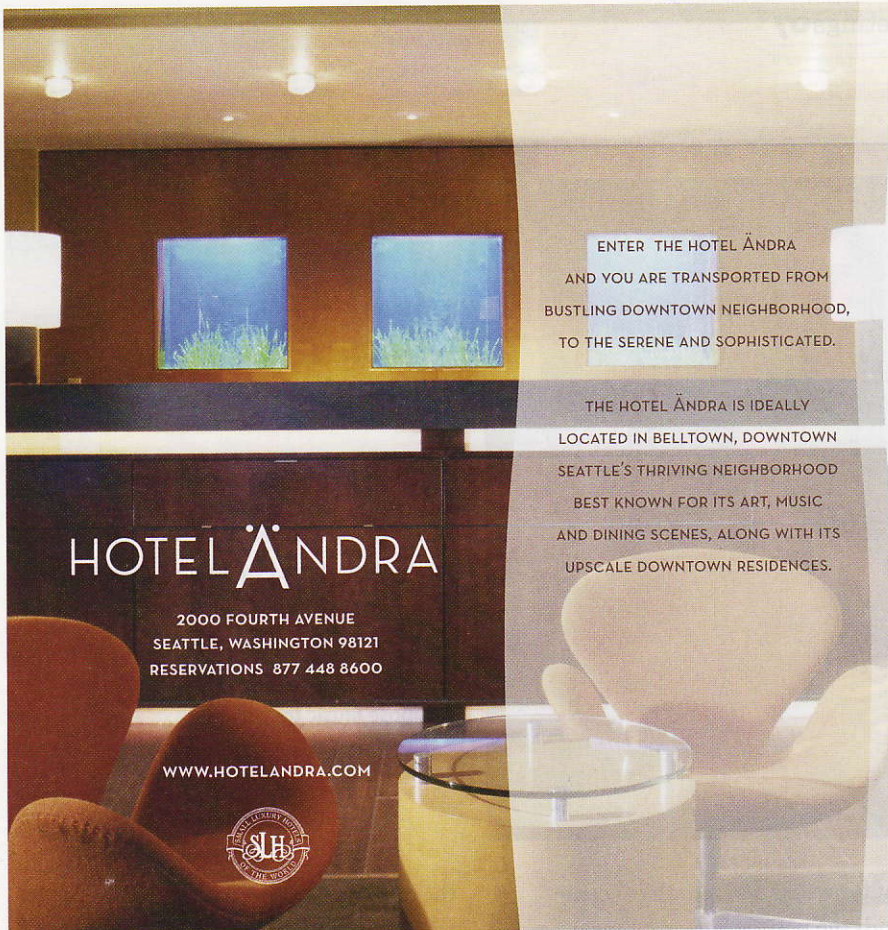
It depends on the goal, experts say. If

the objective is to reward employees with some fun and give them a chance to get to know each other better, activities such as wine tasting and cooking lessons can do the job. But they "don't translate into lasting gains once the team returns from its offsite," says consultant Ben Dattner. Team building involves a task that doesn't correlate to professional seniority and that focuses on an activity that builds the group's ability to work together interdependently. Facilitators encourage participants to dig deep and be honest with themselves and each other. When employees take what they've learned and apply it to the workplace, the investment pays off.

"What doesn't work," Dattner says, "is when team-building activities are really more about individuals competing with each other than about the team working together—for example, an activity such as bumper cars where each individual's goal is to push others off the track."

Syncopate, headquartered in Los Angeles, uses music and DJ instruction as a vehicle to transform team dynamics. Its staff of musicians and DJs helps to forge bonds among colleagues by helping them





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At events led by Nevada-based Repario, teams build bikes, which are then donated to underprivileged children.


to create their own music, which is both podcast from Syncopate's Website and broadcast on [www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com). The company now counts Adobe, Levi Strauss & Co., Medtronic and Cerimon Pharmaceuticals among its clients.

According to Syncopate founder Thoryn Stephens, "Technology has taken away the way people connect. We're using it to bring people back together in a way that is both fun and effective."

Each team becomes its own musical group, defining its own sound, song and presence. Members compose the music, create an image and sell it to "record executives" who judge teams on a number of categories, including marketing, composition and presentation.

Stephens says the exercises are tailored to address critical issues within a particular industry. "We offer an experience that engages them, breaks individuals out of their silos and allows them to apply their individual talents to meet team goals."

One novel initiative that combines team building and community service is the Building A Dream program created by training firm Repario, headquartered in Lake Tahoe, Nevada. In the program, teams build bicycles, then create a 60-second commercial for their product. The surprise



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for team members: Underprivileged children in the community are selected through Repario's nonprofit partnerships with groups such as Bikes for Tykes to receive the bikes at the end of the program.

Program director James L. Carter says Repario's Building A Dream program is effective because it gives participants an incredible shared experience. "This program creates a positive experience and bond among the participants and helps [them] understand how easy it is to make a positive difference in someone's life."

Team-building fees vary widely depending upon the exercise and specifics of each program. Repario, for instance, charges \$82 per person for the Building A Dream program for 2,200 people. The Passing Zone's juggling-based team-building exercises start at about \$17,500 for up to 1,000 people.

That might seem like a lot, but to many, the payoff is worth it. "There always seems to be an 'ah-ha' moment that happens when a team truly gets it, and as a facilitator, that's what we're looking for," says The Passing Zone's Morse. "In a team-building setting, this moment can be contagious. As soon as you see excited communication between team members, that's when you know it's working." ▲

Iyna Bort Caruso is a freelance writer in Rockville Centre, New York.

## DETAILS

**F1 Race Factory** 602-302-7223;  
[www.f1racefactory.com](http://www.f1racefactory.com)

**Loews Coronado Bay Resort & Spa**  
800-563-9712; [www.loewshotels.com](http://www.loewshotels.com)

**Syncopate** 800-899-2317;  
[www.transformyourteam.com](http://www.transformyourteam.com)

**The Passing Zone**  
630-584-6408; [www.passingzone.com](http://www.passingzone.com)

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