

Team Building Goes to the Extreme

By Gary Tufel

Forget about the standard team-building activities you've participated in or heard about. They can be effective, to be sure, but there's an entire, albeit small, genre of extreme team building. Although some of these activities may not be for the faint of heart, they can and do create powerful bonds within groups. And they feature an emphasis on social consciousness.

Take what Jeff Evans offers, for instance. Evans, who is founder of Colorado-based MountainVision Inc. (www.mountain-vision.com), is an extreme team-building creator and guide as well as a speaker at various events.

According to Evans' agent Dan Sims, CMP, president of The Agency Speakers, "One of Jeff's best trips is taking executives to the Inca Trail where they descend upon Machu Picchu. Each night the group works on different tenets of leadership and teambuilding (including writing their own epitaphs) and on working together under obvious adverse conditions." Evans conducts the programs for such clients as ESPN executives, schools and associations.

"I actually went on a trip primarily to learn more about Jeff Evans so that I could articulate his strengths to meeting planners. Jeff has it all as a speaker/trainer. He is good-looking, articulate, an author and a certified physicians assistant, and one of the hottest speakers in the country," said Sims, who went on a Mt. Kilimanjaro trip.

You may have heard of Evans, who 13 years ago was the primary guide for blind climber/athlete Erik Weihenmayer on mountains, rock faces and adventure races all over the world. Evans worked with Weihenmayer to create a climbing vision, establish an acceptable definition of success and refine effective methods of communication, all innovative and challenging. He took Weihenmayer up Mt. Everest. Some notoriety came from that, and he began branching out from that in 2001, addressing corporate and executive groups around the world.

But what does he do, exactly, to build team spirit, and how does it work? And why do his clients subject themselves to such extreme experiences?

"I wanted to come up with new concepts," says Evans, a lifelong mountaineer and guide. Evans was happy with the response to his speaking engagements, but today those engagements are often just step one on a continuum that stretches from speeches through 11- or 12-day treks to such exotic and remote areas as Machu Picchu, Mount Kilimanjaro and Bhutan.

"From my experiences as a guide I found my niche was teamwork and leadership. I realized I wanted to take the next step and do something powerful." He wanted to not only describe extreme experiences, he wanted people to experience them, and in ways that would make them examine not only their professional lives but also their personal selves. Evans decided to morph his love of mountaineering into helping leaders overcome physical and mental obstacles and strengthen their leadership skills through what he calls "ultimate team-building opportunities."

Evans has partnered with Bruce Jackson, head of the leadership development program at Utah Valley University, on three team-building trips in the past few years. They developed a large manual, "Principles of Personal Excellence," for use on the trips.

Last June, Evans and Jackson led a group of 17 participants to Machu Picchu in Peru. The trips he conducts aren't physically dangerous, Evans says, but they're physically demanding. "Participants don't do actual climbing; they're too tired. In Machu Picchu we take an obscure trail which is a bit easier on people's bodies. It's just trekking and hiking, but we get up to 14,000 feet," says Evans. "No one is put into any scary situations, but there is a certain level of conditioning expected because we keep moving for about five or six hours at a time."

"The cornerstone of why we do this is that we could do these discussions in a conference room, and it would still be meaningful. But by being in an exotic place, and watching colleagues and strangers pushing themselves and sharing intense details and leadership styles, creates an inviting, neutral atmosphere that encourages introspection and self examination," he says.

Every evening, the manual is used to spur discussions that include elements of emotional and intellectual stimulation. The goal: to have participants, who are sometimes from different organizations and sometimes from the same one, to come up with a personal ethos to guide their personal and professional lives. Jackson presents the precepts and Evans gives anecdotal examples, Evans says, based on his experiences with communication, leadership and vision. Usually the discussions last about two hours each and they're opened up for dialog. "There are intense conversations and often tears," Evans says. The last day of the trip is spent back at a hotel.

Evans offers an entire package that includes keynote speech and team-building activity, the latter of which usually attracts top-level executives who later communicate what they've learned to their employees. And he said word of mouth about the program has been so good that he hasn't had to market it. "My keynote addresses make the point that you can't be a better person until you're better with your family and other connections," Evans says.

"Extreme team-building trips are the tip of the iceberg in effecting real change in an organization," says Evans. "We try to get top executives to experience real change and then to impact their cultures. Once they've felt it, it's easier for them to communicate it to their organizations." Evans also uses a software program to communicate daily information about the team-building activities to those who want to experience it second hand.

There's also a social responsibility aspect to the experiences. In the middle part of each trip a service project is done, in the case of Machu Picchu at a village Evans has adopted. One project involved the building of an adobe chapel at a local school, where participants worked side by side with local villagers, in keeping with the trips' themes of generosity and purpose. "It's important to give back and we do this as a way to thank you," Evans says.

According to Entrepreneur Ron Lindorf, Evans and Jackson led a disparate group of strangers into a tightly knit group of friends via their nightly leadership discussions and training exercises. Lindorf says he can think of no better way after a hard day of physical demands to further stretch oneself than the way Evans and Jackson guided him and his group to. It created a trip that expanded and enhanced the whole person, and provided some practical life takeaways that only emerged in this kind of natural setting, he says.

Chris Lee, CEO of San Diego-based Access Destination Services, has conducted such team-building activities as ocean water kayaking and go-carting at a specially built miniature Long Beach Grand Prix track. But recently his company worked with a client who wanted to do an activity for its IT group, which consisted of about 40 men and one woman, which would leave a large footprint on a community. They came up with an idea that not only impacted the client, but the community that the activity was held in.

Access Destination General Manager Jennifer Miller said her company had about three weeks to create an activity for the client, whom they had worked with about five times previously. "They wanted to do something that applied to their jobs and they wanted to do it in New Orleans. They were going to be in New Orleans for their corporate meeting and wanted us to come up with something for this school group. They couldn't find a company in New Orleans to do it and they called us," she says.

The company had been looking for a team-building activity for about four months, says Miller, and Access listened to their objectives and knew what they wanted to create. Miller contacted a New Orleans-area charter school, which had lost its computer lab in Hurricane Katrina nearly three years earlier. The school had a building available that had been constructed to house the lab but nothing to fill it with and no way to set it up. There was a limited budget, but Access's client, which was switching from PCs to laptops for its employees, decided to donate the PCs to the school lab as well as desks, software and other equipment, and to help the school's junior high and high school students get everything set up. This would be its team-building activity.

"We had to get the room measurements for the lab and have all the computers and other equipment shipped there. And we flew a six-person team there," she says. The IT employees, working with the students, got the lab set up in a day and a half. Families pitched in, as did the local sheriff, who came to the site with parolees who also helped out.

"Our clients worked with the children all day to set up the lab and trained the kids to be teachers themselves. What resulted was a fully functional computer lab and our client is still their contact as a mentor," Miller says, and she calls the activity, which was custom-made for the client, "very unique."

Lee says that it was an extensive bonding experience for the client's IT people. "IT people have the reputation of being more technical and less emotional; this project let them have fun and get takeaway value. We later received letters and e-mails from them saying that the experience was life-changing and that they were very happy to have been able to give back to a community by taking on a sustaining mentoring program. It not only increased their loyalty to the company, but to the students and each other," he says.

Lee says that rather than just have the tech people show up with the lab equipment, the entire installation was broken into teams that took part in preplanned "competitions" on different tasks. They had to earn certain components, which Lee likened to the competition on the "Survivor" TV show. An MC

conducted the competition and winners were celebrated. The activities also included full explanations of why each task was being performed and how, and celebrations of all the students' knowledge of technology.

Miller notes that the pairing of students and the IT people into teams that worked with and against each other to install the desks, computers and other equipment was how the traditional team-building aspect took place. A trivia contest was used that applied to the various participants' fields of expertise but was basic enough for the students. Different age groups competed to win extra computers and other equipment for the lab. Lots of activity took place simultaneously and teams traded furniture and computer items back and forth in order. "One team may have lacked enough bolts for the furniture but had too many furniture legs, while another might have had more than enough legs but too few bolts, so trading took place," she says.

The program is one example of how Access Destination Services customizes programs to a company's objectives and commitment to social responsibility, says Lee. "They communicate that to the public and we try to match it to an activity. Some are hesitant to step out of the box, but it's starting to catch on," he says.

The exercise encouraged and taught interaction, teamwork and a commitment to both the host company and to the community, Miller notes. And it was such a powerful experience that at the end of the program, many of the IT team had tears in their eyes, she says.