



GUIDE TO TEAM BUILDING THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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The Value of Team Building for Your Organization

Companies across all industries are currently experiencing an engagement crisis; according to a U.S. Gallup poll¹, 70 percent of employees are not engaged at work. That's bad news for many employers, because engagement is not only correlated with business growth, but engagement actually *drives* growth.

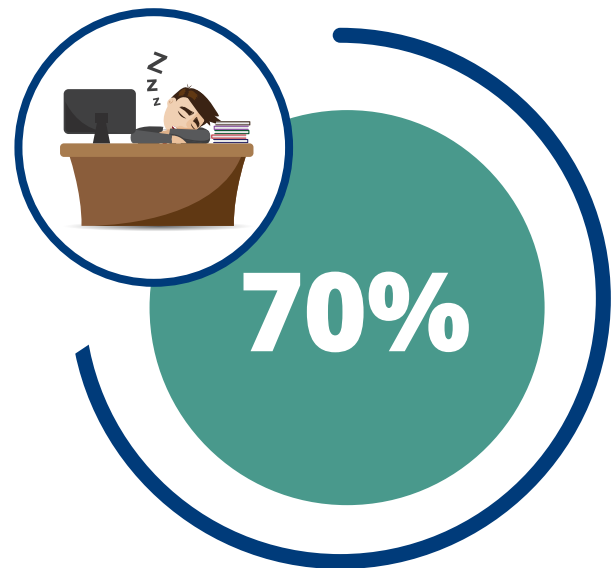
Gallup studies also found that engaged teams outperformed disengaged teams on measures of profitability, productivity, customer ratings, lower turnover, and fewer safety incidents. Teams in the top quartile for engagement outperformed bottom-quartile teams by 22 percent when it came to profitability.¹

What is the backbone of workplace engagement?
The way your employees work and engage with one another. Effective team building improves communication, strengthens relationships, and sparks collaboration—so your team members feel connected to the company's mission and to each other. Put simply: Investing in your teams improves employee engagement, which can radically strengthen a company's bottom line.

Effective team building encompasses a wide range of organizational concepts, which will be explored in this guide. At its heart, though, team building is about strengthening teams to create a more engaged, effective, and high-performing workforce. At the same time, “team building” can be a generic term used by organizations to cloak larger, more specific problems. For example, a sales team whose members seldom work together on the job often doesn't need the same kind of team building program that a marketing team, whose members are moving parts of one whole, requires. To that end, it's essential to break team building down into its more granular goals to truly ensure success.

In this guide, you'll learn strategies for approaching the development of team building training and how experiential learning can radically increase the effectiveness of that training within your organization.

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How Do You “Build” a Successful “Team”?

It’s a common problem in many workplaces today: departments assemble individuals together to address certain concerns, without giving much thought to who should be included and how the “team” should be organized. Simply calling a group of colleagues a “team” doesn’t make it so! You’ve likely already identified this, which is why you’re looking to bring “team building” to the table for your organization. What does it truly mean to build a great team?

Certain vital characteristics are always present in healthy, high-performing teams. Some of these characteristics are the following.

- High-performing teams identify and work towards a common goal (which is more clearly defined than a broad “concern”).
- Each team member contributes enthusiastically and consistently to the team’s efforts.
- Communication between team members is frequent and effective.
- In large teams, smaller subgroups or pods may form to tackle specific tasks.
- The team has a designated leader who takes responsibility for the team’s results.

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Another huge part of forming and maintaining successful teams lies in establishing a respectful, safe team culture. Take a cue from Google, which studied what makes its best teams successful as part of its 2012 "Project Aristotle" initiative.² Google found that the one major commonality in successful teams was that team members felt safe sharing ideas with one another. It didn't matter whether team meetings were run efficiently or were a little chaotic—the important thing was that each member contributed equally to the dialogue. Keep the above characteristics in mind as you determine if (and how much) you need to invest in your team building training.

With these things in mind, "team building" starts to be more specific than a group outing or holding hands around a campfire: There are real outcomes to be obtained from properly building up a team and real goals that team building can help your organization achieve.



Establishing Goals to Drive Team Building Outcomes

It's not enough to simply engage in rote team building exercises, either through on-site training or off-site conferences, in an effort to strengthen collaboration and camaraderie in teams. To get the most out of your team building, you need to be specific with your goals. Setting goals before you design your team building training is strategic, because your goals can drive the shape of your training.

Questions to consider as you establish goals for your team building training include the following.



What do you hope to accomplish after a team building activity?



What's the greater business impact? How are your team building goals aligned with established business goals?



What's the root need you're using team building to address?



In what way(s) are your teams currently dysfunctional? Are they struggling with common team challenges like communication and camaraderie, or does the issue lie with more specific skill challenges like planning or goal-setting?

Think about what you want to happen after your team building experience or program. What are the expected outcomes? By working backward from establishing expected outcomes to designing the team building experience, you will always have a vision to return to as you set the agenda for your training exercise. Plus, establishing clear goals and expected outcomes will make getting buy-in for your on-site training or off-site conferences easier. By establishing the expected ROI and aligning your team training with overall business goals, you're speaking the language of your company's executive leadership.

Setting goals also makes the training experience more valuable for trainees. There's always a subset of participants who are less than enthusiastic about participating in team training. They often view the training as "busywork" that takes them away from the real work back at their desks. These reluctant participants want to know what's in it for them. When you establish clear goals tied to business outcomes and share those goals with participants, you eliminate concerns about your training being all fluff and filler. Setting and sharing goals during training is designed to influence participants' thought processes—as they go through the training experience, they're aware of how this training is applicable to their jobs, which serves as major motivation to give the training their all.

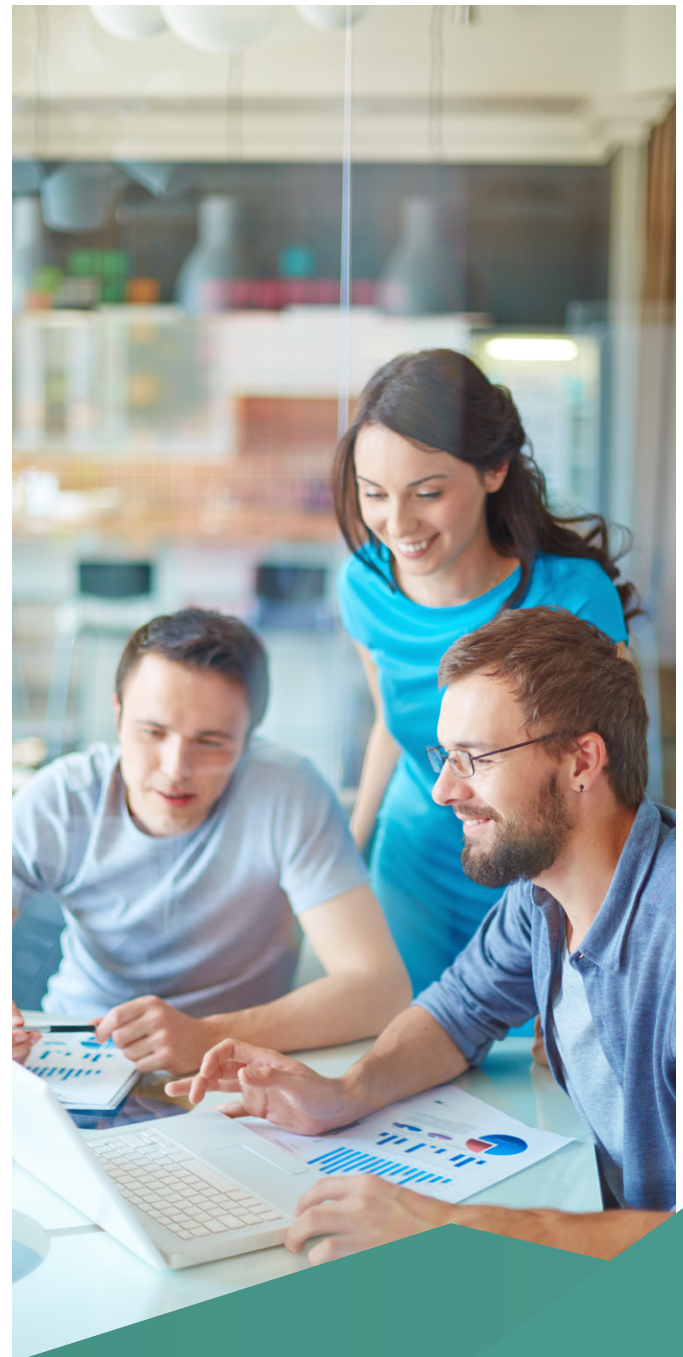
Using Experiential Learning to Build Teams and Reach Goals

Experiential learning is uniquely equipped to address the challenges of teams and create lasting behavior change in all team members, making it a valuable tool in any training program's toolkit. Through experiential learning, team members get "hands on" with their training, working together to solve a themed challenge that parallels the workplace challenges they face as a team. Thanks to its engaging, inclusive nature, experiential learning gets each team member in the habit of participating fully in the team experience.

At its heart, experiential learning is about "learning by doing." In an experiential learning exercise, participants are fully engaged with the team building training, so the lessons aren't just theoretical—they're visceral, immediate, and truly memorable. How does experiential learning compare to other common training methods, like PowerPoint presentations or lectures? With experiential learning, participants commonly retain up to 90 percent of the material they learned, whereas the typical retention rate of traditional learning hovers around just five percent.³

When it comes to team building, traditional training approaches are often participatory—think of classic team building exercises like the trust fall or the egg-drop challenge. What really sets experiential learning apart is how it fully immerses participants in a story or situation. Participants must work together to solve a themed challenge, like "building a bridge to save endangered wildlife stuck on an island" or "journeying through the jungle to find a treasure." These immersive situations are full of vivid details and follow classic storytelling principles, bringing the situation to life for participants.

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Thanks to its use of themed, immersive situations, experiential learning differentiates itself from more common training tactics used in team building in a variety of powerful ways. These differentiators include the following.



Theming the training situation creates a safe environment in which participants can take risks and learn from their failures. If the team building training is simply a simulation of a common workplace scenario, participants would be less likely to take risks—because no one wants to risk failure at work!



Immersive experiential activities inject excitement and fun into team building exercises, which helps keep participants engaged throughout the entire training. In our experience, even participants who start off unsure about participating in an experiential learning activity—because they can't immediately see the value or are turned off by the game-like atmosphere (common in many team building exercises)—are all smiles by the end of the training.

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Even though the experiential learning activity may feel like a game, participants must use their real business-related skills on a real situation. The experience is challenging in the same way a real work scenario would be. Compare that to other common team building exercises, like a rope course, where the challenge seems far more abstract and unrelated to problem-solving skills needed on the job.



Themes are especially useful when it comes to creating cohesion for full-day (or multi-day) off-site events and conferences. You can design multiple team building exercises that share a common thread that then ties into the larger conference theme.



Experiential learning exercises end with a thorough debrief, where the connections between the themed experience and participants' on-the-job reality are made. During the debrief, a facilitator explains that the strategies the participants can use to win in the experience are the same strategies that they can use to “win” at work as a team. Plus, because the themed nature of the experiential learning activity doesn't usually correlate to just one specific business problem, facilitators have flexibility during the debrief to make connections to several different problems brought to life by the experience. This is especially important for team building training, because dysfunctional teams are rarely dysfunctional in just one way. If a team exhibits multiple dysfunctional behaviors during the training, the facilitator has the freedom to address them all during the debrief, adjusting how much time they spend discussing each one according to training priorities.



An experiential learning exercise creates a clear line of sight between a team's behaviors and their effect on an outcome. Teams are often formed at work to tackle big projects. These team projects have a lot of moving parts, long timelines, and fluctuating budgets—which makes it hard to pinpoint the cause if the project doesn't turn out as anticipated. During a compressed experiential learning activity (exercises usually don't take more than two hours), however, the effect of a team's behavior becomes crystal-clear in a short amount of time. Team members come out of an experiential learning activity knowing exactly what behaviors cause dysfunction, and they can feel confident that applying their new skills during on-the-job team projects will make a big difference.



Experiential learning powerfully builds conviction in team members.

That's because experiential learning is distinctly different from role-playing exercises often used in team building. In an experiential learning exercise, participants are not asked to adopt a role—they're required to be themselves. By being themselves, instead of playing a role, participants cannot elude responsibility for the exercise's outcome; no one can excuse the outcome of the training experience by saying, "Oh, that wasn't really my fault; I was just playing a role." Participating as themselves, therefore, builds conviction to change in team members, because they've experienced first-hand how they personally acted and reacted in a situation. They're then able to carry that personal conviction to change into their work, owning their actions and taking responsibility for outcomes—and they can better understand how their past actions led to specific outcomes when working with their teams.



Experiential learning reinforces the idea that, succeed or fail, win or lose, the outcome of an experience has been earned together.

When you're a member of a dysfunctional team, it's tempting to "pass the buck" if something goes wrong, blaming other team members for negative outcomes. This happens when teams are operating in silos and team members don't see—or refuse to recognize—how their actions affect the larger outcome. The immersive, intimate nature of experiential learning makes it extremely hard for participants to pass off responsibility. Effective experiential learning activities are designed for maximum engagement; with the help of facilitators, participants work together to solve the themed challenge or fail trying. In an experiential learning activity, "failing" together is A-OK, because failure reveals crucial team dynamics that are affecting team performance in the real world. Failure becomes a learning opportunity during the debrief, as participants come to understand what behavior changes they need to make to change performance outcomes. In experiential learning, the focus on the team building exercise is always on achieving an outcome together. This approach trains team members to identify and work toward a common goal, rather than simply fulfill one's duties and then "check out" from the team dynamic.

A Closer Look at How Teams Gain Competencies Through Experiential Learning

What does experiential learning look like in action? To help understand how experiential learning is uniquely suited to tackling common team problems, consider the following three examples. These examples highlight common team dysfunctions and how experiential learning exercises can address these dysfunctions in fun and effective ways, transforming them into key competencies that all healthy teams must possess.

1. Poor Communication

The Problem

When most people think of the problems facing dysfunctional teams, a lack of good communication skills probably comes to mind first. Communication issues plague most teams at some point or another—large or small, it's hard to keep the lines of communication open in a team juggling multiple tasks in order to achieve big workplace goals. Poor communication in teams most definitely hinders progress toward those goals. When team members aren't on the same page, that results in a duplication of effort by members or crucial information being left out that could speed up progress or improve results.

The Experiential Learning Approach

Experiential learning is especially well-suited to addressing communication issues in teams, thanks to the collaborative nature of its exercises. There's no way to solve an experiential learning challenge alone; ignoring other team members during an exercise is a surefire route to failure! Experiential learning activities can be tailored to foster frequent and effective communication between team members as they rally together to tackle the training exercise.



2. Dysfunctional Decision-Making

The Problem

The decision-making process can quickly come to a standstill in a dysfunctional team. With too many hands in the proverbial pot, it's hard to determine who should take the lead when making decisions. Or sometimes teams have the opposite problem—they make decisions quickly, without adequate information or input from key stakeholders. In a dysfunctional team, rapid decision-making may be regarded as a sign of productivity...when really a team's poor decisions lead it further and further away from achieving its goal.

The Experiential Learning Approach

An experiential learning exercise clearly lays out the cause-and-effect relationship between a team's decisions and project outcomes. When the outcomes of a team's dysfunctional decision-making are immediately apparent, as they are in experiential learning, teams can no longer pretend that making a decision—any decision—counts as being productive. Decisions made rashly and without proper input may lead teams to “lose” the game. Immersive experiential learning exercises illustrate how *every* decision a team makes fuels the eventual achievement (or lack of achievement) of a team's goal.

3. Ineffective Meetings

The Problem

Team meetings are too long, too boring, and just too wasteful of everyone's time. Unfortunately, team meetings often seem to go in circles, with members leaving the meeting with less clarity than when the meeting started!

The Experiential Learning Approach

Meetings can and should be one of the most powerful tools at a team's disposal, used to clarify priorities and catapult teams toward their goal. Experiential learning viscerally illustrates the difference between a meeting that's a waste of time and an effective one. Thanks to the themed nature of experiential learning, you can create a scenario that reflects the somewhat chaotic quality of team meetings—think an excess of information and data, shifting priorities, and members who go off on tangents—and then task your team with creating actionable meaning out of the chaos. Team members learn how to sift through data points and remain laser-focused on the goal of the exercise in order to succeed, and they then carry those new skills into their real-life team meetings.

Establishing the desired outcome of your team building training can help you determine what kind of experiential learning exercise will most benefit your team. Luckily, experiential learning activities are often designed to address more than one type of team dysfunction, so you can achieve multiple team building goals within a single session.



Next Steps

Tackling challenges as a team requires your teams to be firing on all cylinders—with each member in tune about team goals, roles, communication, and leadership. Experiential learning is also an excellent vehicle to use if your teams are simply in need of a tune-up. As you explore ways to strengthen your team building training, consider taking these next steps.

- Determine your team's real struggles - is the team not meshing, is it experiencing issues with unhealthy team dynamics, or are members of your team struggling with a lack of more specific team skills that are preventing them from effectively tackling team projects?
- Establish goals for your team building training and expected outcomes so that you can measure the results of your training against its intended purpose.
- Examine your current team building efforts through an experiential learning lens. Are there “holes” in your current training that experiential learning can fill?

Engaging, fully immersive, and memorable to boot, experiential learning gives team members the skills they need to transform into a high-performing team. Consider implementing experiential learning activities at your next team building event to see your teams work together more efficiently and creatively than ever before.





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