

# Don't give team-building a bad name

*Put time and thoughtfulness into planning activities that suit the ages and interests of your staff*

*Your financial advisory practice is doing well, but you are working harder and for longer hours and seeing fewer rewards. Perhaps it's time to consider bringing other people into your practice. This issue, the latest in a series on team-building: team-building activities.*

**T**HE MENTION OF A TEAM-BUILDING activity is often met with the rolling of eyes and derision among employees, while visions of "trust" exercises dance through their heads. It doesn't have to be that way.

"Team-building at its most essential is people doing activities outside of work to get to know one another with new insight," says Shannon Waller, director of new program development at **The Strategic Coach** in Toronto. This can be as simple as getting the gang together for drinks to celebrate the end of RRSP

season or as in-depth as hiring an outside firm to conduct a formal team-building session. There are merits to each method.

Waller leans toward a more casual approach to team-building. "Actual team-building activities can get a bad name because people are intimidated by them," she says.

Scott Plaskett, a certified financial planner and CEO of **Ironshield Financial Planning Inc.** in Etobicoke, Ont., is also leery of verifiable team-building exercises. "These types of events tend to put a lot of pressure on people, and unless there is some frequency to them, the good had during the exercise is quickly lost to reality."

Instead, Plaskett treats his team to dinner several times a year. Once he also whisked them away — in a stretch limo — for lunch at a country inn in Caledon, a scenic town north of Toronto. "I know the staff really ap-

preciates the effort we go to in making every event memorable," he says.

Indeed, Waller notes, the most important thing any manager can do when it comes to planning a team-building event (even if you don't call it that) is to put time and thoughtfulness into planning the activity. Popular options include: a group cooking lesson at a cooking school; visiting a mutual fund company for a learning session on new products; taking your team to the mall in a limo and then giving everyone a mall gift certificate to spend on themselves; or, a group improv lesson at a comedy club.

Consideration of the ages and interests of your staff when choosing an activity is crucial. Over the years, the team at **Harry Perler Financial Group** in Coquitlam, B.C.,

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## Improved relationships and greater trust

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has enjoyed wine tastings, barbecues, movie nights and a weekend getaway at Harrison Hot Springs. Senior partner Harry Perler says there is no "one size fits all" solution for a team activity.

"When we went to Harrison Hot Springs, it was popular with the team members who brought their spouses, but not as popular with the single people," he says. "And we recently had a martini party. But some staff don't drink." He notes that dinners out are a popular option, as younger staff tend to go out together after the meal.

Regardless of the activity, a successful group event — which should involve group learning or a celebration of the team's progress — will lead to improved relationships, increased collaboration and greater trust. "Closer teamwork will show itself in subtle ways," Waller says, "such as there being fewer conflicts between coworkers."

If you're looking for a more measurable improvement in staff performance, consider hiring an outside team-building facilitator, says Shawna O'Grady, professor and director of team facilitation for the **Queen's University** executive MBA program in Kingston, Ont.

team-building, but so few people connect it with improving performance levels," she says. "More structured types of events allow people to process the learning better and draw out insights after the activity is complete."

O'Grady also notes that structured events can "force" team members to socialize with colleagues they may otherwise avoid. "With a social event, you're taking your chances about who will speak to whom," she says. "People naturally will gravitate toward people with whom they already have friendships."

One of O'Grady's most popular exercises among both her MBA students and the outside corporations for whom she consults is having a group of five to eight team members work together to assemble a wooden frame.

After timing the first attempt, the group must put the frame together again and beat their previous time. "The whole team must be engaged in the process," says O'Grady. "There is shared leadership, and good ideas can come from anyone in the office hierarchy."

After the team successfully builds the frame a second time, a facilitator leads a debriefing conversation about the activity. "People will change their work behaviours based on what they have gone through in

O'Grady admits that she comes across the occasional eye-roller but says buy-in starts at the top: "The manager sets the direction; if he or she is involved, that sends a clear signal that others should get onside."

Whatever team-building activity you choose, O'Grady recommends that group events take place at least every six to 12 months; newly minted teams should devote two days to team-building activities. "The more time you put in, the better your team will perform down the road," she says. **IE**

*The team-building series concludes in the February issue of Investment Executive with a look at how to present your team to clients and prospects. For other articles in this series, go to [www.investmentexecutive.com](http://www.investmentexecutive.com).*