

WHITE-WATER RAFTING AND OTHER DUBIOUS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT ADVENTURES

by Tim McGrady in collaboration with Rosie Steeves

The spectacle of colleagues who have just returned from an adventure-based leadership development program can be a sight to behold. You might see them holding court at the water cooler bragging about the Class 4 river their team ran in the rafts, their Flying Fox zip descent on a high ropes course or the heroic mainsail change in 30-knot winds. Flexing sore muscles and sporting a bronze tan, they are the envy of all the pasty-faced cubicle-denzens in your office.

What an adventure! You can't help but wonder, though, if it really had anything to do with leadership development. Many researchers and human resources professionals are asking this question as the popularity of adventure-based leadership development skyrockets. The Web is full of companies selling leadership development by promoting a wide range of adventure activities from ropes courses to whitewater rafting to all-out summit attempts of 8,000-metre peaks. How sexy is it to see a picture of six guys sitting around a marked-up white board?

How much more fun is it to imagine your team, all smiles and fleece, negotiating a low ropes course or maneuvering a raft, all the while learning about the stages of group development?

We know of one small communications company that has worked in the past with an adventure company to create a customized program to focus on teamwork. The program involved participation in a high -ropes course. Participants made their way through various stations, each of which involved working through a physical challenge with the team at significant height from the ground either on rock, platforms or rope webs suspended from posts.



The manager in charge of the initiative had noted that companies such as **Telus**, **Nokia** and **Bell** were putting some of their key staff through such programs. He reasoned that there must be some payoff in terms of heightened morale and smoother team functioning. Indeed, after the courses, participants spoke in glowing terms of the sense of trust they had developed with their colleagues.

Inevitably, however, the veneer of change wears thin as the realities of the return to the workplace set in. The same old interpersonal challenges reappear. On an adventure course, when your colleague was dangling from a thin climbing rope with you on the other end, there was a strong incentive for him to want to trust you. Back in the office, one curt e-mail might vapourize that trust and the context isn't there to rebuild it easily.

What research clearly tells us is that, for the growth and change to be sustained, there must be ongoing reinforcement. To be truly effective, these programs must be part of an integrated approach to leadership development. There are also significant differences in the outcomes of a half-day program versus a five-day retreat.

Our clients tell us that their post-event experience with adventure-based programs has been much different when we followed it up with a systematic and tailored coaching and leadership development program. When left as a stand-alone event, the adventure experience really only amounted to team-building without much of a leadership development component.

Adventure-based or experiential programs can be a great way to kick-start a program and get participants in the right frame of mind. They can also be an effective way of demonstrating organizational commitment to the leadership development initiative. However, if you don't follow up

with sustained strategies to capitalize on the fruits of that investment, you will likely leave the participants up a creek without a paddle.

Tips for organizations:

- Trained facilitators are key. Outdoor jocks will miss the opportunity to translate the learning into a business context, while those with little outdoor training will be unfamiliar with the specialized debriefing techniques required of experiential activities. You will need facilitators with experience in both experiential learning and business.
- Be clear about what you want to get out of an adventure-based leadership program – the fun factor is important, but clarify with your consultants what the deliverables are for the activity in terms of leadership development or team building.
- Ensure that you can measure the deliverables in the short and long term. Have the consultants provide a mechanism for determining your return on investment and the success of your investment.
- Create a plan to follow through with short-term gains in productivity, morale and team
- Cohesion. Consider making the program part of an integrated leadership development program.
- Research shows this to be the critical piece for lasting results.

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