

Training that cooks!

The team that cooks together, learns together

BY KENNETH E. JACKSON

The concept of engaging people in group activities in order to build teamwork is not new.

Executive retreats and off-site meetings that include outdoor adventures, golf tournaments, or role-playing exercises are relatively commonplace.

Similarly, the idea of people cooking a meal together is not an unusual notion. Cookouts, holiday get-togethers with family members or preparing dinner with a few friends are time-honoured methods for establishing or renewing relationships.

An emerging trend in organizational development involves combining these two concepts by taking groups into the kitchen for the purposes of team building and leadership development. Because the kitchen is a familiar setting for most participants, team dynamics tend to emerge very quickly.

The leader should select a room with facilities that includes multiple cooking surfaces and allows the facilitator to observe each team member's behaviour. Leadership skills such as organizing, planning, co-ordinating, delegating and controlling can be easily assessed and evaluated for further development.

LESS STRENUOUS THAN OUTDOOR PROGRAMS

This type of program lends itself to a wider group of potential participants than some of the more strenuous outdoor programs since the requirements of strength and agility are not as great. And, issues can arise much more quickly in the kitchen than

in an outdoor program since there is a lesser degree of apprehensiveness or sense of danger.

Participants can be any intact group which must work together to accomplish an important objective. The group may be a newly formed team whose members are trying to learn about each other, a team that is having trouble working together or one that simply wants to enhance adequate teamwork.

The program content can range from the superficial to the complex.

Currently being offered by various firms are "let's-bond-over-cooking" -type classes in which participants learn to prepare an interesting recipe and then talk about their experience. Other programs include cutting-edge seminars that are developed around sophisticated assessment tools, with specific recipes designed to elicit workplace issues.

COST

The cost for such programs can range from several hundred dollars per participant to as much as \$1,000 per participant, depending on the facility, program content and choice of facilitator.

The most common sessions are one-day programs that accommodate up to 10 participants. However, sessions may be expanded to offer individual counselling, or customized to meet specific corporate objectives.

FACILITIES

Facility requirements for such programs include:

- space for classroom work; and
- a cooking facility large enough for the group to work comfortably



IF YOU CAN'T STAND THE HEAT... in the office, head to the kitchen. At the Viking Culinary Arts Centre in the US, managers learn team-building techniques — as well as the proper way to sauté.

on several parts of a recipe at one time.

FACILITATION TEAM

The facilitation team should have a good working knowledge of the kitchen including cooking and safety technique, a solid knowledge of the team-building process and the ability to connect the two.

If personality assessment is to be part of the program, consideration should be given to whether administration and scoring can be done at the session or must be done beforehand. This will depend on the type of assessment inventory to be used and how the information will be used in the program.

A typical comprehensive program combining personality assessment and cooking activities begins in the classroom, where participants explore the dynamics, personality styles, strengths and weaknesses of each of the members of their particular team.

Next, participants move into the kitchen and receive recipes



RECIPE FOR SUCCESS... Through cooking, managers learn about their communication, leadership and negotiation styles. The lessons learned in the kitchen continue long afterwards, back at the office.

and group tasks that have been designed, based on the assessment information, to bring out stresses or obstacles that mirror those of the workplace.

As team members interact to transform the cooking ingredients into a gourmet meal, the facilitator observes behaviours and identifies differences and similarities that exist within the team.

After the meal is prepared, the team members enjoy their creation while the facilitator helps them process behaviours such as how roles were assigned, how responsibility was managed and what goals were accomplished.

This is all designed to foster a better understanding of each team member's personality and communication style and to enable the group to overcome friction and work more effectively together.

Some critics believe that cooking-oriented team-building programs are simply a fad, and others question their cost-effectiveness. However, for the past five years, leading North American corporations have incorporated culinary team building into their HR training and have reported strong results.

As one manager noted, "when a sales or customer-service team isn't working together effectively, it can threaten not only produc-

tivity, but customer service. I've seen employees undergo a transformation from passive-aggressive and unco-operative to taking initiative and dramatically improving their relationships with co-workers and clients. Those investments have positively affected our bottom line."

Participants report that going through this type of program not only improves working relationships, but is also useful in understanding clients, friends, spouses and other family members.

When groups return to the office and members resort to their old behaviour, someone is sure to humorously remind them of the recipe for creating harmony and improving communication.

One team has even adopted the phrase "that's how we cook" as a gentle reminder to each other that the team is displaying some less than desirable behaviour that was uncovered during the culinary sessions.

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BON APPETIT... A unique reward after the team-building exercise — participants get to eat the results.