

VOODOO BONDING

BY DIANE FAULKNER

The allure of an exotic environment coupled with the real need to have key people work well with peers and staff acts on the mind like a spell.

So, before you pay out the first installment on your next team-building program, consider this excerpt from *The Miami Herald* by Elaine Walker, a journalist with the Associated Press.

"More than 100 members of Burger King's marketing department walked barefoot over an eight-foot strip of glowing, white-hot coals as part of a corporate bonding experience at the Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo (Fla.)....

"Fire walking was supposed to show them that by reaching beyond their limits, they [could] achieve things they never thought possible.

"Instead, about a dozen Burger King employees suffered at least first- and second-degree burns on their feet."

OUCH!

Within minutes of this piece being posted on M. Lee Smith Publishers' Employers Forum on HRHero.com, hundreds of executives from across the country offered proof of the growing disenchantment with development programs that promise vast improvements in the softer skills of doing business.

Not only were some of the proposed retreat activities outrageous, they complained, but also the fees to participate were getting downright ridiculous.

For a daylong lesson in empowerment, not unlike Burger King's flame-broiled experience, the cost is usually about \$15,000, according to Robert "Cork" Kallen, owner of The Achievement Group, which facilitated Burger King's retreat. (That's not including the cost of Workers' Compensation, sick time, medical benefits and overtime, of course.)

Now, exactly how many boards are you aware of that would approve a \$15,000 expenditure so their execu-

tive and management teams can burn their feet walking on hot coals when they can fry their feet for free in someone's fireplace?

Either way, they'd prove they have the ability to accomplish whatever they set their minds to, which is the point of the exercise. Right?

OK, so maybe that's a little harsh. After all, Burger King executives and retreat participants—even the burned ones—did report feeling "empowered" after the retreat. But isn't there a better way to build a bond?

Of course there is, and everything you need to know to build it is already floating around somewhere in the back of your head.

Every retreat facilitator you hire has the underlying goal of making sure you attain two things:

- perspective and
- backbone.

CLEAR YOUR MIND AND OPEN YOUR EYES

The reason we resort to retreats to help us work together is simple: We've lost our perspective as to why we are where we are—even in the credit union movement.

Our job responsibilities have taken on undue importance, and it's affecting how we relate to each other, how we work with each other, and how we value our lives outside the office.

While it's noble to believe in the principles of the movement, we cannot for a moment forget that, outside of those few individuals who actually started our credit unions, the majority of people come to work to earn a paycheck.

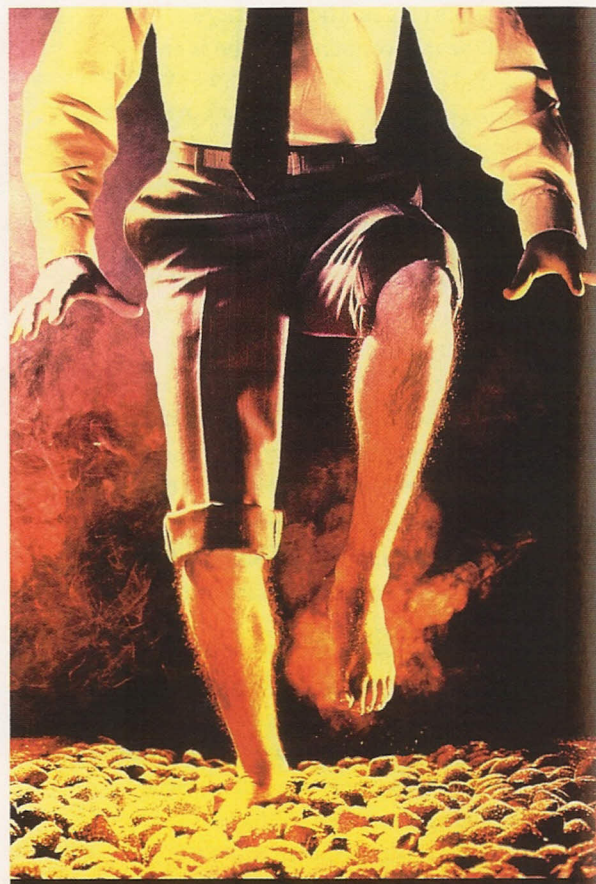


PHOTO BY STEWART TILGER/STONE

Beware of extravagant team-building activities.

That being said, everyone in every position was hired because they possess specific knowledge, skills and abilities on various levels that are needed in certain positions to make the credit union function most effectively.

Each hire is a statement by the hiring manager(s) that, given proper guidance and training, an individual has the ability to function independently in a specific role, regardless of the age, race, gender, experience, job title or exempt status of the hire.

The basic concepts we need to wrap our minds around, then, are:

1. Everyone working is a thinking, breathing, feeling adult.
2. No one arrives at work intend-

ing to make anyone's life miserable or produce bad work.

3. No matter how interested people are in what they do, they work to make money in order to afford a life outside of work.

4. Everyone is paid to work together, not develop everlasting friendships. (If it happens, it's a bonus, but don't force it.)

5. Real life happens outside the office.

As a manager, continually demonstrating these concepts in behavior, policy and practice is key to conjuring an environment for effective teamwork.

GET REAL AND STAY REAL

The reason for having a retreat outside the office and especially at a resort is to get people out of their corporate uniforms and into less threatening costumes.

The idea is that we become more approachable when we realize that not many of us look so great in shorts anymore.

We are forced to let our guards down as we play the retreat games and have some fun as we work together to figure out strategies to beat our newly formed opponents.

Oftentimes, the best plans come from people we never expect, because we never hear from them in meetings at work.

And right there is where you learn lesson one. Why don't you hear from these people? What is it about your meetings, presence or practices that deters others from sharing what they know?

Remember, you hired these same people because of what they know and what they could bring to your credit union—so why do they clam up?

You don't need a retreat to figure this one out. There's something that's making people withhold their full capabilities. Accept the fact that part of that something is you, and then create a simple, but well-planned, anonymous survey to discover the rest you need to know.

A quick peek at review histories and counseling notes wouldn't hurt either.

Resource

Check out the following for ways to improve your credit union team.

Read "Improving Interdepartmental Communication" in *CUES FYI* at www.cues.org/fyi/n_61901.htm.

A variety of teambuilding games are described in the HR.com article titled "Library of Training Activities." Look for it on www3.hr.com/ and search for "games."

The book *More Games Teams Play: Activities and Games for Powering up Your Potential* by Leslie Bendaly (McGraw Hill Ryerson Limited) provides activities and games that can be used to facilitate team building, team participation and team motivation. Buy it at www.cues.org/barnes.html.

Also read "Are You Game?" from the July 2001 issue of *Credit Union Management*, p. 28, or on line at www.cues.org/fyi/0701areyougame.htm.

For tips on making the workplace fun, read "Yeeaa-Haw!" in the March 2001 issue, p. 26.

Any disturbing patterns discovered will point directly at behaviors, practices—and sometimes written policies—that pit various position goals against each other and make building effective working relationships next to impossible.

Once you have this information, you can work with your staff to set goals to overcome and rebuild the trouble spots, which will only lead to a positive affect on the ultimate objective of serving your membership well.

Retreats are great at getting people to communicate on a lot of different levels, but the newfound skills don't often make it back to the office.

The reason? The levels discovered don't translate clearly from the playing field to the workplace.

Remember, the work world is not the real world. It's much easier to ruffle people's feathers and get into trouble at work than almost anywhere else, which is the reason games are used to teach this lesson.

In a game, everyone is taught the rules and objectives, what moves are considered offensive and what's defensive.

Players are clear on the significance of, but not necessarily skilled at, all positions.

They are also taught precisely how to best interact with all positions in order to legally score.

Translating this perspective from field positions to job positions, it

becomes clear where connections are lost.

To best work together, all positions must be seen as equally necessary; and those occupying the positions, equally talented.


And it's up to the board, president and management teams to ensure this perspective is transformed into action

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consistently throughout the credit union.

With everyone seeing each other and their roles equally, it will become natural to speak to each other as equals and also to listen to each other's ideas for new strategies with equal respect.

Sound impossible?

Let's just say you stand a better chance of forming a bond this way than suggesting a casual stroll over some coals. 

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