

Bringing Teams Together - One Game At A Time

by: Peggy Grall

How to...

"The best way to ensure the success of a new initiative, merger or culture change, is to fiercely support the leaders of the change" says Peggy Grall, corporate coach, speaker and author. Working in health care, government, manufacturing and retail, she is recognized for her talent to quickly facilitate personal and corporate change. Her extensive work as a psychotherapist, and her understanding of leadership principles, has equipped her to provide effective guidance to leaders and teams during times of intense change and transition.

Her strategies include:

- Coaching leaders to recognize and service the shifting needs of people in transition
- Providing a sounding board for a leader's personal innovation and risk assessment
- Challenging and then guiding teams out of silo thinking and into cocompetition
- Supporting and shaping the emerging leadership skills of young managers

The pursuit of high performance teams has become the Holy Grail for business today. Never, in the history of work, has the need for teams to work efficiently together been more necessary. John Doerr, the Silicon Valley venture capitalist who backed Lotus, Compaq and Netscape said, when asked about the status of business today that. "In the world today there's plenty of technology, plenty of entrepreneurs, plenty of money, plenty of venture capital. What's in short supply are great teams." He's right.

Industry and the private sector alike, take advantage of a variety of team forms, including Executive Leadership Teams, Project-Specific Teams, Management Teams, New Product/Redesign Teams and ad-hoc, project-specific teams. The same challenge faces the leadership of every team: How do I take this group of people and make them into a team - a real team?

THE CORE INGREDIENT FOR TEAM SUCCESS

Whatever the type of team, the core ingredient for success remains the same; making this group of people into a cohesive unit that can quickly build a foundation of trust, capitalize on the skill sets of the team members and capture the synergy of the group. High performing teams need: a supportive environment, the necessary skills, clarity of roles, adequate time to process, rewards, opportunities to interact with each other and a passionate goal worth the pursuit. So, how do you bestow all of that? Read on!

Whether you call them games, activities, simulations, exercises, experiential learning techniques, or active learning sessions, the way to bring a team together fast, is to involve them in intense interactions with each other.

When used artfully, team games can be a powerful antidote to boredom and can help teams to:

- Get to the point: they are powerful teaching tools for driving home a specific idea, process or goal
- Boost morale: games provide a sharp contrast to conventional training techniques and can inject an element of competition and fun into team learning

- Build trust: involving teams in experiential simulations challenges their natural caution about relying on other team members and breaks down the silos that exist in companies and within teams themselves
- Be flexible and innovate: within the moves of a well-crafted game, a team will come face-to-face with their sacred cows, the status quo, and those pesky barriers that prevent teams from creating novel approaches to new challenges
- Sanction positive team behaviors: when cooperation and creativity are demonstrated, and when people stretch to actively engage with other team members, the leader or facilitator can highlight and reward these behaviors, ushering in a new set of standards for the team.

People learn at a higher level through the use of team games. They learn by inventing information from their own resources, discovering information and solutions from someone else, acquiring information by eavesdropping on other team members, or sparking off of another team member's idea.

WHY DO GAMES WORK SO WELL?

Look at kids. Case in point - my 3-year-old grandson. When he comes to visit he's not in the door five minutes before he wants Nana to "play me". That's his way of asking me to leave whatever else I'm doing, focus on him and play. We play Legos, cars, trains and sports. We laugh, we tease, we compete and we learn. We learn new ways to make a toy work for us, about the limits of our intelligence and ability to make an activity work, but most of all we learn about each other.

He's learned how to get my attention, my help, what things I think are funny and what are in the "ta-ta" category. I've learned how quickly he can grasp a concept and the best way to introduce new ideas to him. I've also learned where his limits are, what he acts like when he's frustrated with a task versus just tired and needing a break. Wouldn't it be great if we knew all that about people on our team? We can know and the vehicle to gaining this information is play.

It's precisely these personal learning's from which team members benefit most. Each time I work with a team and get the evaluations back, there is a theme that appears. When asked what part of their time together they enjoyed the most and felt was most relevant to changing how they work together, they identify the game time.

LEARN WHILE YOU PLAY

We are a species that learns while we play. Research has long told us that learning is best done when accompanied by an emotional experience.

What do you remember? Think about the most memorable training, workshop, presentation, or off-site you've attended. There is a saying among professional speakers, "They will forget what you said, they will even forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel." How did you feel? Now, what was the point of that speech, day or event? I bet you remember.

We remember that which is reinforced with a strong emotional experience. That emotional component can be the thrill of competition, the frustration of the height of the learning curve, the challenge of the seemingly impossible, the satisfaction of a task completed or the sincere, unsolicited appreciation of team members. Whether you experience the "thrill of victory or the agony of defeat" in a game, the end result is the same-you won't forget what happened.

TEAM GAMES

Team games are especially effective at testing and refining the Emotional Quotient of team members. In his article entitled, "Group Versus Individual Performance: Are N+1 Heads Better Than One", which appeared in the Psychological Bulletin, G.W. Hill conducted research on the effectiveness of teams and reported that, "Results from hundreds of groups showed that 97% of the time the group scores were higher than those of the best individuals.

This same effect has been found over and over again, even for extremely short-lived groups, groups that were formed solely for the purpose of an experiment. When teams of strangers listened to a narrative about the ups and downs of someone's career; the more people on the team, the better their collective memory was. Three people did better than two, four better than three and so on."

Games are a great way to put people's emotional skills on the line. When team members are engaged in an activity that demands that they relinquish dominance and share resources, insights and power to accomplish the goal; they alter their strategy and adopt tactics that produce results and win the cooperation of their team mates. This is behavior that leaders dream about!

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is a dynamic sequence of predictable events. The environment, timing, design and props of a game all contribute to the team's ability to translate vital learning from the game to the workplace. The sequence begins with the event or game itself. Games chosen should have a learning objective that matches the specific needs of the team.

Facilitators and team leaders are familiar with group process through the work of B.W. Tuckman. He identified four distinct phases that most teams move through on their way to productivity. Groups can spend anywhere from a few minutes to a few months in each phase, largely dependent on the skill of the leader.

1. The Forming Stage

Teams in the Forming stage require games that accelerate the process of getting to know each other's strengths/limitations, frustration thresholds, specific skills and roles.

2. The Storming Stage

When a team enters the Storming stage, characterized by power struggles and role challenges, a team benefits from games that allow them to present their ideas and expertise in an environment where the motivation to both act independently and cooperate is essential to succeeding at the game. Storming teams can benefit from games that allow them to define what is allowable and what's not for the team. When storming teams are given survival tasks that force them to really listen to each other - or die - they often engage each other in new and effective ways.

3. The Normalization Stage

As a team begins to Normalize and the conflict is subsiding; games that serve to further clarify roles, fan creativity and innovation, and reward cooperation, are most effective.

4. The Performing Stage

So, what games do teams need that are already solidly in the Performing stage? These teams can capitalize on what trainers call - the Mother Games! These are the games that only good teams dare tackle. They are games that challenge the team's sacred cows, ferret out the small cracks in the armor of team members and challenge the leader's functional credibility. For good teams that want to become great, I use simulations and events that have no conventional solutions or that success can only be achieved if team members step way outside their comfort zone.

I put them into risky games, physically exhaustive games - games that push the team past polite, predictable and "team as usual" responses. These high performance teams learn to consistently produce exceptional results. They assume responsibility for themselves as individuals and the team as a unit. They support and encourage each other in removing obstacles and achieving extraordinary results.

Out beyond the safe harbor of the normal patterns of a good team lie the elements of a great one. Facilitators and team leaders must take their team out in the deep end if they want them to make the leap to exceptional.

The second step in the gaming process is facilitating the game. Strong facilitators know that there is an art to coaching a successful game.

The three cardinal rules of gaming are:

1. Be very familiar with the elements of the game - you will lose credibility if you are unclear in your explanation of the rules and parameters, awkward in your use of props or clumsy in debriefing. There are no 'guinea pig' teams - be prepared and practiced.
2. Be a coach - not a manager, friend, participant, rule keeper, critic or consultant. Gamers need coaches to clarify the rules, keep the game moving, attentively observe and call the game at the right moment. Your contribution to the game should be that of a silent cheerleader - always pulling for the team, but not part of it.
3. Be brief in the debrief - spend only the amount of time it takes to allow the team to: (1) describe what happened - looking for wins and failures, (2) share their feelings about the events of the game (remember the emotional component of learning) (3) identify their own behaviors and choices and the effectiveness of them, (4) draw applications to their work environment, both as individuals and as a team.

Your best approach to the debrief process is that of a seasoned coach. Masterful coaches ask powerful questions. Challenge yourself to make no statements - just ask questions - and see how much more you get from the team, and how much more they learn from each other.

Here are some of my favorite debriefing questions:

- What was your favorite part of the game? Why?
- What surprised you about how you performed in the game?
- What surprised you about how the team did?
- Why do you think you were successful / not successful?
- Were there times that you had an idea and didn't share it?
- What held you back?

- Were there team members that you wished had participated in a different way? How?
- When did you know you were going to be successful / not successful and how did you alter your behavior as a result?
- How is what you did in this game the same / not the same as how you perform at work?
- What's one thing you wish you had done differently? What kept you from doing that?
- What do you now know that you need from the team? How can you get it?
- What does this team need to do / stop doing - NOW?

One of my best memories with a team was at an off-site at a beautiful Canadian resort in the Laurentians where I had taken an international leadership team from a Fortune 500 company to spend a few days looking at their role as leaders.

These men and women had a background in design engineering and so I setup a game where they were required to replicate a Lego version of the Star Ship Enterprise. There were four teams; each had to choose a Captain, a Number 1 and a Counselor.

Only the Captain was allowed to view the prototype of the Star Ship and report back to the group what it looked like and how to build it. I instructed them to use a "just in time" supply model and not to collaborate with the other groups. My teenage son had built the proto-type in about 20 minutes and I had estimated about an hour to complete the task - they took two!

When the teams were humming along (about 20 minutes into the game) I called a halt and announced that there had been a merger. I mixed up the teams, changed the reporting structure, positions and responsibilities of the team members. Chaos ensued.

Finally one team broke away and created what they defiantly referred to as a stripped down, European model of the prototype. They innovated and got their product to market first. Members from one of the other teams not only gave up, but also started to confiscate materials from the other teams so they couldn't finish either!

What they discovered

What they discovered in the debriefing was that, had they ignored my directive not to collaborate, all of them would have been successful. As you might imagine, debriefing was fun, fiercely interesting and unearthed a lot of relevant information for these leaders about how they handle competition, authority, market demands and intense change.

Executives, managers, team leaders, trainers and facilitators have at their disposal a myriad of ways to help bring teams together. In my work with senior leadership teams, gaming is the most powerful one I've found so far.

Weak games, ineffective debriefing and no transferable body of learning, all water down the effect. Teams need gaming with teeth! They need leaders and facilitators with the courage to tell it like they see it, to shine a light on the brilliance and the missteps of the team, challenge firmly held team beliefs, focus efforts and outrageously celebrate the team's success.

Teams that are given the opportunity to engage in outstanding games, under the direction of a skilled gamer, can move their performance to the level of champions and beyond. Try it and see!

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Peggy Grall is a Certified Executive Coach, key-note speaker and former Psychotherapist with 19 years experience in the areas of Change Management and Conflict Resolution. Organizations experiencing mergers & acquisitions, culture transformations, and other intense change initiatives have utilized Peggy's skills to help them navigate the high-risk, high-reward atmosphere of significant change. Her unique background equips her to work effectively with individuals and teams to assess and address the complex *people issues* affecting *change outcomes*. She is President of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers Toronto Chapter and in 2004 was nominated for **Business Person of the Year** and nominated again in 2005 for the coveted **Athena Award** recognizing Women in Business.

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