



Team-building without eye-rolling

John Seelmeyer, 1/29/2007

Nothing is more certain to draw widespread amounts of eye-rolling, James Carter and William Mariani say, than plans for corporate team-building events.

They should know.

Their Stateline-based Repario Ltd. conducts dozens of team-building exercises annually for companies large and small across the country, and the two entrepreneurs are putting a lot of thought into ways to increase the value and reduce the eye-rolling.

Their latest strategy: "Building a Dream" programs in which workshop participants spent four to six hours building bikes for a group of unknown customers.

When participants are done, the doors are opened and the customers — poor children from the local community — pour in to receive a brand-new bike.

Companies ranging from Pfizer to American Express have latched onto the program that Repario runs in cooperation with the nonprofit Bikes for Tykes organization.

The power of the event, Mariani says, comes from the immediate feedback that corporate participants see as the results of their work is reflected back in the eyes of children.

Carter notes, too, the seminar works because its theme, "The Power of One," ties to the world view of Gen Xers who often focus on themselves and their specific role in the workplace.

But the success creates a heck of a lot of work for Repario.

It's doing enough of the bike-building seminars that it started importing bicycles itself rather than relying on third-party distributors.

A 2,500-person seminar — Repario often works with big divisions of big companies — means the training outfit needs to coordinate the delivery of about 400 bicycles to a hotel ballroom or other venue. Add in the challenges of transporting 400 children to the hotel to receive completed bikes. And don't forget the usual logistics — making sure the trainer has what he needs and the room is set up right.

With a schedule that can include as many as 10 big events a month, along with a host of smaller jobs such as individualized coaching, the workload is a lot to be handled by the company's four-person staff.

Much of the actual training is delivered by a cadre of contractors that Carter and Mariani have developed since launching the company four years ago. Repario brings the contractors together occasionally for retreats to ensure they deliver the company's training consistently.

"Most of the quality people want to stay independent," says Mariani.

The contractors deliver courses that range from team-building — along with the build-a-bike program, an adventurous scavenger hunt is popular — to leadership development and corporate skills such as communication.

Just as challenging as juggling a big course catalog and a cadre of consultants is management of cash flow. Carter explains that suppliers want fast payment but participants sometimes are slow getting their money to Repario.

To add more stability to the business, the two entrepreneurs who met as students at the University of Nevada, Reno, look to widen Repario's revenue stream to include operation of training programs for franchise companies. Another possibility is the addition of sales-training modules.

At the same time, the workshop business continues to gain traction as Repario is invited for repeat performances and participants spread the word. Already, the company has conducted sessions for 35 percent of the Fortune 100 companies, and its list of clients stretches across four pages of its Web site.

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