

OCTOBER 2007

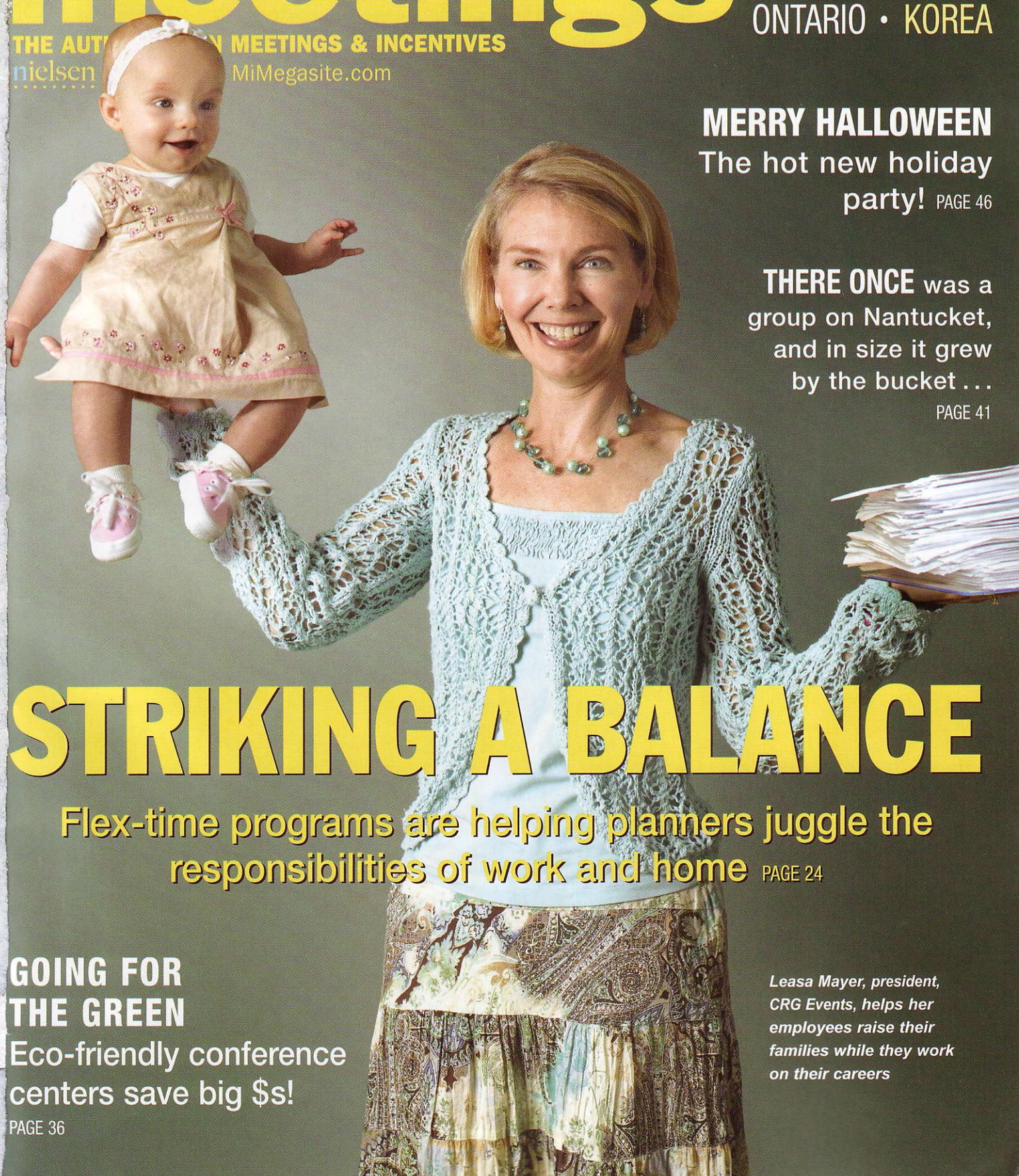
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*Leasa Mayer, president,
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> On Site

Stop Meaningless Teambuilding

By James Carter

3 Include a photo or illustration of some important aspect of the event, preferably showing action, as opposed to a simple "mug shot" of an individual, unless the individual is the focus of the event. A kit for distribution at the opening of a new building would have photos of the building's exterior and interior. The dedication of a new computer center might show users at the computers, working with the aid of the center's director.

4 Distribute copies of speeches or other remarks (if available) to be made by key officials or others at the event.

That's about it. Putting all these items in a simple folder with two pockets, or a folder imprinted with your organization's logo, is all that the media needs. And don't try to shepherd media around to meet your company's executives. A reporter interested in talking with any of them will let you know it—as long as you brief her or him about the news value of doing so. When talking to, or preparing materials for, the press, less often translates to more.

George Haber is president of Information Services, a public relations and event-planning agency in Jericho, NY. He has taught college courses in marketing and promotion, and conducted seminars on event planning. He can be contacted at (516) 822-9756 or geohaber@optonline.net.

The Wall Street Journal columnist Jared Sandberg began the New Year by suggesting that corporations resolve to "lose the goofy teambuilding exercises" ("Can Spending a Day Stuck to a Velcro Wall Help Build a Team?" 1/1/07). I could not agree more.

Regrettably, the words team and teambuilding have become the most misused and meaningless terms in business today. If there is any doubt, observe the expressions on people's faces when the topic is suggested. Reactions range from eye-rolling to skepticism to outright contempt, as participants conjure up images of silly group games and forced interaction (embarrassing episodes of *The Office* come to mind).

I believe that corporations need to move away from the old concept of teambuilding because it no longer resonates with employees. Baby boomers who were taught as children that there is no "I" in "team" are retiring, leaving behind a generation that is much more comfortable with the concept of individualism. This

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new generation of workers is less loyal to a particular company or work group, and more focused on themselves and their specific role in the world (and, by extension, the workplace). For them, teambuilding has come to represent an upper-management tool that has no direct relevance to their daily job tasks.

Thus, a shift in language is necessary. After all, isn't teambuilding just a result of individuals communicating clearly, sharing information, and collaborating instead of competing? Sales teams that understand this are amazing to behold and are a force to be reckoned with inside a company. I believe that an effective teambuilding session is actually about individual-building, with the feeling of being part of a team as a side effect.

If "teambuilding" has come to symbolize the marginalization of the individual, then the "Power of One" is the potential that

each one of us has to change the world. The most powerful teambuilding programs are those that help individuals relearn, or recognize the importance of, the skills they already have. Otherwise, they are fun at best or a complete waste of time at worst.

So, what can a company expect from an effective teambuilding session? The most powerful way is to give individuals a shared, positive experience within a non-threatening and safe framework. A paintball game that leaves people with bruised bodies and sore feelings is not an effective development tool. Neither are feel-good activities like picnics, bowling, or Friday happy hours. These activities have a place in organizations for providing people with an outlet for fun, but they should not be considered teambuilding.

Instead, a successful teambuilding program includes three important components. First, program leaders must introduce the

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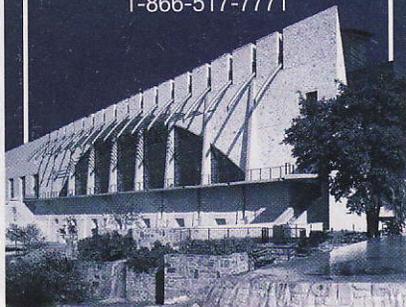
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activities by explaining their relevance to team performance. Second, the event must provide a shared, positive experience. Finally, the activity must facilitate a well-thought-out debrief. In many ways, the final debrief is the most important component of the program for purposes of discovery and

self-actualization, yet it is the part that is most often rushed or neglected altogether. Program leaders must take the time to discuss insights with participants, and to interpret the individual and team traits that were exhibited throughout. This is the only way the lessons are learned and applied back to

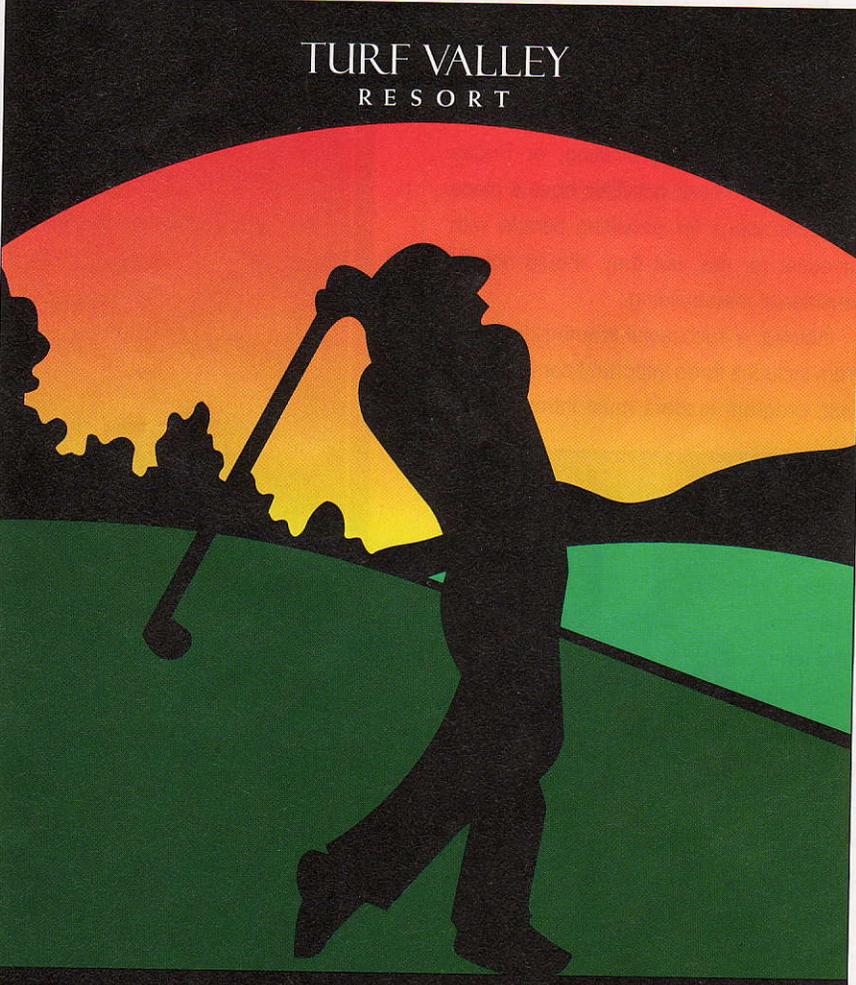
work. Basically, this discussion is the actual teambuilding.

Of course, reinforcement after the event is an essential component of successful teambuilding. Fortunately, reinforcement does not have to take a lot of time or effort. Some companies hold regular "lunch-and-learn" sessions or schedule short group activities at regular intervals. Others encourage employees to create personal action plans with small, attainable goals that they can share with a "buddy" for encouragement and support. Whatever the reinforcement method, the team should be involved in choosing it. This will increase accountability and buy-in.

The next question that most companies ask is, "Do I need to hire someone to do this for me?" Very often, the difference between a bad teambuilding experience and a good one depends upon the experience of the facilitator. If you rate the importance of teambuilding a seven or above (on a scale of one to 10) but have tried teambuilding activities in the past without success, consider hiring a professional. Many companies find that an external facilitator brings fresh energy and re-introduces feelings of honesty and trust that may have eroded due to years of interpersonal neglect.

Teambuilding is a lot of work. So why bother at all? Teambuilding activities were borne out of a desire to improve workplace communication—a skill the next generation of employees needs to work on. Indeed, one might argue that technologies such as e-mail and instant messaging have eroded face-to-face communication, making teambuilding exercises more relevant than ever. Individuals must still communicate clearly, share information, and collaborate to be successful in the corporate world.

James Carter is the program director and founder of Repario Ltd., an employee development firm that leads events and meetings for companies across the country, from small start-ups to Fortune 500 companies. For more information, visit www.buildingteams.com.



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