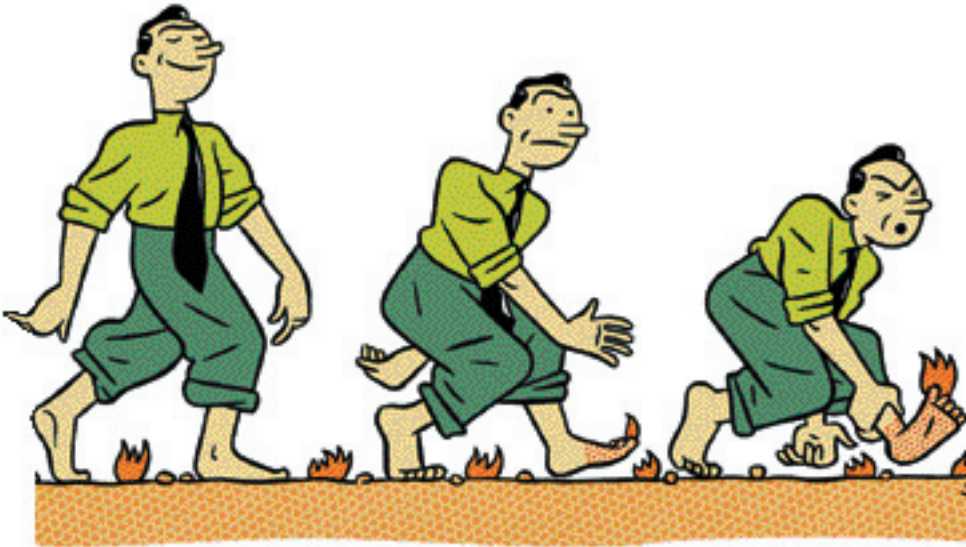


# BUSTED: TEAMBUILDING

Harry Onsman questions the value of corporate directives to have fun outdoors



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**T**EAMBUILDING means different things to different people. As a training activity, it remains a bit vague, even to training specialists. The outdoor training version, in particular, is hugely popular, presumably because it is supposed to combine having fun with achieving productive outcomes in the form of better functioning teams. Fun and productivity: now there's a win-win solution.

I don't want to argue against having fun at work (although it scares me when it becomes a corporate directive), but I do wonder whether the objective of building better teams is actually met through "teambuilding" activities. Research suggests this kind of activity doesn't have much impact on the effectiveness of the team once it is back at work doing work. It seems when we've finished throwing people off cliffs in harnesses or pummeling them in little rubber boats in whitewater, they just go back to work and behave the way they behaved before. Occasional

humorous anecdotes about Fred breaking his ankle while abseiling is often the only legacy.

Some believe that a lot depends on the quality of the people running the teambuilding activities but again the research fails to back this up. In controlled experiments, even when the trainers are carefully selected for their expertise in facilitation and debriefing, the impact of the activities on the team is virtually impossible to detect.

## PROVE IT

Part of the problem is the oversell by those with a commercial stake in outdoor training of all kinds. Their claims about the impact of their activities range from the unproven to the outrageous. There is not a shred of evidence to suggest that any of this outdoor teambuilding stuff works. In fact, there is significant evidence that it does not, as even a quick glance at the research material will show (see references below).

On the whole, it is safe to conclude that

teambuilding may be a lot of fun but that it has no significant impact on work groups once they return to the workplace. One recent article titled "Outdoor training – corporate jolly or valuable development tool?" came down firmly on the side of "corporate jolly".

Possibly the most irresponsible advocates of outdoor training are those associated with the idea that sharing extreme risk in groups will somehow pull people together and create team spirit. This essentially stupid idea has provided rich pickings for those reliant on inspirational solutions to ordinary problems.

US motivational guru Anthony Robbins popularised the idea of using extreme risk to prove courage, especially as applied to people who are just trying to do a day's work. He made his name from showing people how to overcome their natural fears, and take risks by walking over hot coals.

The science of that particular activity was debunked some years

ago. For those interested, it's about preparing the coals correctly so that they form an insulating layer of ash, which combined with the correct speed of walking, makes the experience completely safe. I'm reporting research here rather than personal experience. Just how stupid do you think I am?

But the teambuilding gurus persistent in arguing that taking physical risk collectively will somehow create a team. With the wonderful German notion of *schadenfreude* in mind, it's interesting to see that it can back-fire (pun intended). My favourite incident in Australia is the Australian Rules football team that indulged in a spot of 'hot coal walking' to inspire them to greater team effort in an upcoming match, only to have several members burn their feet so badly they could not play for several weeks. Who says there is no poetic justice in this world?

*References: William, S., Graham, S & Baker, B, "Evaluating outdoor experiential training for leadership and team building", The Journal of Management Development, 2003, vol. 22, no. 1; Payne, J, "Outdoor training – corporate jolly or valuable development tool?" Training & Management Development Methods, 2000, vol. 14, no. 1.*

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HE GETS a logbook, she gets a version of the traditional baby book. But such blatant gender stereotyping is a deliberate part of DeakinPrime's new strategy on leadership training. The company has come up with two new training programs that confront head-on the fact that men and women do leadership differently. There are all the usual workshops, coaching, mentoring and meetings as part of an immersion approach that contrives the kinds of experiences that help you learn. The bloke's program is about hurling them out of their comfort zone and recording the results in said log book. The women get to really focus on that glass ceiling and record their experiences in a "me" book – like the baby books used to record a child's progress through the world.