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& Paul Birch



Instant
Teamwork

Sample

*Motivate
and
Energize
your team
now*

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1. The need

Instant Teamwork

This book is packed with extremely quick exercises to enhance teamwork. You haven't time? That's no excuse. You will lose a lot more than five minutes spent on one of these exercises if you aren't getting the best out of your team. Perhaps your team, your group, your course is perfect. Maybe. But if so, you are unique. For the rest of us, we have a potentially powerful resource in a team. Like most powerful resources it needs tuning. Hence *Instant Teamwork*.

You've been there

- ✦ *You have pulled together a new team. They're nervous. They don't know each other. They don't really know what their role is. They need something to break down the barriers and get them started.*
- ⊖ *Your team is well established, but it lacks a certain drive. Team meetings are dull with a capital D. You know that that everyone could contribute more.*
- ✦ *It's day one of the training course. Half your audience are reading newspapers. The other half are looking as if they'd rather be somewhere else.*
- ✦ *You have brought together a cross-functional group to attack a serious business problem. Everyone knows what the problem is, but no one knows how to get started. You need something to boost the creative energy.*

Are these examples familiar? They ought to be. We've all been there. Whether you are running a team or part of it, whether you are involved in a meeting, training or a problem solving session, so often there's something that's not quite right. What is needed is a quick fix.

Synergy or disruption

Everyone knows that teams are great. Just try using 'teamwork' as an insult; it won't work. Every management text, every football game commentary, every corporate communication hammers the message - the team is the ideal. Contrast 'team player' and 'loner' - which would you rather see on your performance report? Yet look at most real teams and you will see something less than perfect.

The theoretical benefit of a team can be summed up in one word - synergy. Synergy was originally a biological term, describing the way a combination of different parts of a body could

provide more than simply the sum of the parts. More recently it has come to apply to a group of people in a similar way. Teamwork is supposed to combine the talents of the individuals to produce something more than is possible with each individual taken separately. We can all think of examples where this is true. But equally, it is possible to think of cases where the effect of pulling together a team has a negative effect. 'Teams' may have very positive overtones, but 'committees' (a camel is a horse designed by committee) and 'meetings' (not another meeting; all I do is go from one meeting to another) are very different.

All too often the result of pulling together a group of people is not to provide synergy but disruption. At best, the result is to bore everyone into minimal contribution. At worst, there will be active suppression of new ideas and blatant time wasting. Does this mean that all the hype about teams is mistaken? In certain circumstances, yes. There are some activities that simply work better when undertaken by an individual. But generally, and certainly in the business context, teams can bring real benefits. The trouble is, how can you get the team working together? It would help to know what is keeping it apart.

The nature of the beast

A team is a collection of individuals. Always. This is one of those self-evident truths that it is very easy to ignore most of the time. It is terribly convenient to think of a team as a unit, as a single entity. It implies focus and control. But it's a convenient fiction; it just isn't true. The underlying individuality is essential. It's the reason you get synergy at all. If everyone thought and acted exactly the same way, you wouldn't get anything different (apart from increased physical contribution) out of ten people than out of one. Unfortunately, individuality is also a problem. It means that a new group will function poorly because other members seem strange. We treat them cautiously until they are familiar. There's a need to break down the barriers - not removing individuality, but increasing comfort with being together.

Groups of people are very good at picking up and amplifying mood. If there is a slight feeling of boredom, or of low energy, before long the whole team is drooping. Performance collapses. There's a need for a boost. Sometimes this can be physiological. Stimulants like coffee, sugar boosters like sweets and biscuits, can give a quick lift. But these are nowhere near as effective as finding a mechanism for increasing group energy.

Groups of people also get into ruts. That's the problem with brainstorming. It is very easy to get stuck in a particular line of thinking. To get tunnel vision. Despite synergy, groups can actually reinforce tunnel vision by suppressing anyone who comes up with a different idea. One dominant individual can also steamroller a group in a particular direction. Often there's a need to take a step back from the process, to be pushed for a moment into thinking in a different way. When the group returns to the problem, this activity should have moved them far enough away from their preconceptions to get moving again.

These three requirements: *ice-breakers* to break down barriers between people, *warmups* to increase energy and *timeouts* to change the direction of thinking are the basis of this book. They aren't miracle cures for a sick team, but they deliver the sort of boost that high energy drinks claim to give athletes.

'Instant' is essential

The 'instant' in the title is no accident. Unless these exercises are very quick they are self-defeating. They get in the way instead of helping. Similarly, they should be available at a moment's notice. You can predict that you will need an ice-breaker at the start of a session with a new team, or that you might need to warm up a group after lunch, but often the best use of these exercises is reactive. Everyone's flagging - let's throw in a warmup. We're getting bogged down, let's have a timeout. Then the instant nature of the exercises comes into play. *Instant Teamwork* is a first aid kit as well as a planned health boost.

Silly games

There can be some resistance to using these exercises. They will sometimes be seen as being silly games. It's not surprising - many of them are. Some would not be out of place at a children's party. But why is that a problem? If it is, it shows a lack of understanding of people. In engineering a change to the way a team works, we are acting at a low level. Although the team's tasks may be entirely cerebral, the interaction between team members is much more at the gut level. Similarly, the development of ideas may be very logical and thought-through, but the original creative spark is something deeper and darker. Is it really surprising, then, that the activities that are needed to improve teamwork operate at a similarly basic level? The fact is, cerebral activity tends to lower energy and interaction rather than increasing them. Like it or not, you need to get down to basics to improve teamworking.

You may appreciate this, but still have members of the group who don't; who refuse to take part because 'it's silly' or 'it's not what I'm here for'. If this happens, it is important not to ignore them. Give everyone else a two-minute tea (or pee) break and take the individual to one side. Explain the scientific reasoning for working at a gut level. If this fails, appeal to their team spirit. They don't have to like it, but please just go along with it to humour everyone else. If you still fail (and it's rare), you may have to consider removing them from the group. Their actions could make their contribution so negative that the team will function more effectively without them.

The real thing

Instant Teamwork isn't going to work miracles, but by using it in the two ways described - as a planned resource to break the ice and to energise, and as a first aid kit when energy droops or

you get into a rut - it will make a huge contribution. You are going to improve the effectiveness of your team, the quality of your output and perhaps best of all, the fun of taking part.

2. The exercises

What's inside

After this second short introductory chapter you reach the meat of *Instant Teamwork* - the exercises. Each comes in a standard format, beginning with some basic information: any preparation required, the time the exercise will take, environmental requirements and team size restrictions. Next is the exercise itself, with notes on feedback, the outcome and possible variations. Finally there is a star rating to help match a specific exercise to your requirements.

Where's the teamwork?

It might seem strange in a book called *Instant Teamwork* that some of the exercises have a low star rating for team building. In fact all the exercises, whether undertaken individually or as a group, are designed to enhance teamwork in this particular session. However some activities are particularly strong on reinforcing long-term team strengths, and it is these which score high on the team building category.

An artificial divide

The exercises are divided into three sections: ice-breakers, warmups and timeouts. These match the three requirements we have already discussed. However, the divisions are frankly arbitrary. A good ice-breaker will also often provide an effective warmup. A timeout that is stimulating creativity will frequently increase energy like a warmup. For this reason, at the back of the book we have some quick reference tables. Want a high energy exercise - the high energy table will point you straight to the appropriate exercises without worrying which section they appear in. Whether you stick to our categories or not is up to you; use the book the way it works best for you.

Ice-breakers

The first section deals with exercises which are designed to break down the barriers between people, whether you are dealing with a new team, a group of people from different parts of the company (or the world), or simply a new, unfamiliar situation. Nervousness, shyness, inhibitions can all be barriers to effective teamwork.

One style of ice-breaker acts at the social level. Here we find out a little more about the other people in the group. Their names, their interests, what they do in their spare time. This is an accelerated version of normal social interaction, moving the team members from strangers to part of your social grouping. Other ice-breakers are physical, putting people in close physical proximity and forcing them to interact. Because this is unacceptable with strangers, the other team members are automatically forced from being 'them' to being 'us'.

Warmups

The whole purpose of a warmup is to increase group energy. Whatever the purpose of the team, it will be more productive if the members have high energy levels. The two key mechanisms of a warmup are physical activity and laughter. By their nature, business teams are largely sedentary, often working in over-heated offices with less than perfect air conditioning. The physical side of warmups helps counter the numbing effect of the environment. It is sometimes enough just to get people out of their seats, or out of the building, for a minute or two. But there is more to the physical aspect. Activity stimulates the body, and hence the brain into more effective action, not just countering lethargy but positively increasing effectiveness.

The second factor, laughter, is easily disregarded. We are, after all, involved in a serious business. Yet laughter is a powerful force for building energy. Many of the warmup exercises will stimulate the team members to laugh. At their own ideas and actions. At others' attempts. This laughter is a very positive force in overcoming lethargy and enhancing productivity.

Timeouts

We have all been in situations where we are trying to work something out. There's just no way to do it. It's impossible. So you put the problem to one side for a little while and do something different. Somehow, when you come back to it, a new angle becomes visible. The problem isn't quite as intractable as you thought.

This approach has a more general application to creativity. It has been conclusively proved that a short distraction, dealing with something completely different, will improve an individual or a group's creativity when dealing with a particular problem. It shouldn't be surprising. The distraction provides a new starting point, a new viewpoint, when returning to the problem.

This is the basis for the timeout. When the team has become bogged down, when it is lacking creativity, when it needs some inspiration, a timeout can help break out of the tunnel of habitual thought. It is sometimes hard to do. Team members may argue that you are breaking their concentration - they want to get on with the job. But when you are marching down a dead end, it's well worth the time taken to look in a totally different direction.

Preparation

As much as possible, these exercises require no preparation. Sometimes there will be simple props, usually items that can be found around any office environment, but such requirements are kept to a minimum. This is essential to maintain the instant nature of the exercises, but don't ignore those that do need a little work. Sometimes props can make an exercise considerably more powerful. There's something special about having something physical, something you can touch. For that reason, we've a short section of exercises involving technology or other longer preparation. They won't always be useful but they are particularly striking.

For scheduled exercises, having preparation won't be a problem. Yet even an off-the-cuff exercise can be planned. You might not know that you'll want a timeout at 3.45 in the afternoon, but you can have a timeout ready for when you do need it. Even if you haven't one planned, if the exercise has only limited preparation, you can send your team members on a five minute stretch break while you get ready. But there remain plenty of exercises which need no more than your people and this book. The choice is yours.

Prizes

It is by no means essential, but it can help the effectiveness of an exercise to have prizes. It doesn't matter how old we are, there's something exciting about competing for a prize. It gives an extra urgency to a task, a concrete goal, rather than the airy-fairy one of improving teamwork. However, they do need to be used with care. Generally, the prize should be trivial, so those who don't win don't feel slighted. Small silly prizes - stocking fillers - go down well. A useful catch-all is a few of the bags of sweets which contain lots of smaller packets. These have the double benefit of giving a sugar boost too, and you can usually engineer the exercise to give a prize to each group or individual, so there's no divisiveness.

4.6 Knots

Preparation – none.

Running time – three minutes.

Environment – needs enough open space to get the team or teams standing in unimpeded circles.

Teams – six, eight or ten people in each team. Works best with a minimum of eight people. Will only work with an even number of people – the leader will need to be prepared to take part or stand back to even out the numbers.

Split the group into even numbered teams. The ideal number for a team is eight, but groups of six or ten are entirely practical. Arrange the team, or teams, into a rough circle, facing inwards. Each member reaches into the circle and hold right hands with the person opposite. They should then hold the left hand of a different person. The team is now in a knot. The aim of the exercise is to untie the knot, leaving the team in a circle. In doing this they can rotate grips, but should not break the chain of hands.

Feedback – This exercise is trivial with four people, mildly challenging with six, a little more with eight, downright difficult with ten and verging on the impossible with twelve. After that the combinatorial explosion means that, while it's technically soluble, it's practically impossible to get untangled. Note occasionally you may end up with two separate or interlinked circles – if so, tell them how clever they are.

Outcome – *Knots* is an excellent warmup that combines movement with a degree of practical thinking and team interaction (usually plenty of laughing and shouting involved). There is an element of ice-breaking too from the physical contact, and assisting each other through contortions, but concentration on the task in hand means that it has limited value in getting to know other team members.

Variations – If there is time, demonstrate with larger and smaller groups how much easier or harder it gets. It is often difficult to undertake this exercise in a meeting room. We have found it effective to move the groups into a public space. This gives more room to manoeuvre, and also increases the warmup potential by throwing in some exposure. If the group is particularly sluggish, you might consider taking them outside to do this exercise, freshening them up and countering the effect of air-conditioning.

Team building ★★ ★
Ice-breaking ★★
Energy ★★ ★★ ★★ ★★
Creativity ★★
Fun ★★ ★★ ★★