

The team meeting is dead. Long live the team!

Lisa Baxter gets creative with practical team building

Illustration by Sugarfree

I've been asked by the AMA to write a piece on practical team building. Now, I'm no team-building expert but my work creates great teams ... I'll give it a go.

In my mind, team building is about creating a climate of positive, productive co-working where the talents of the team are valued and realised in relation to some goal or purpose they all share.

So, what is it about my work that I can share with you that will help you practically build GREAT teams?

It is the **process** that is key. All too often managers are results focused rather than process driven. They tend to concentrate more on getting results as efficiently and painlessly as possible than fully engaging with the combined thinking talents of the team. This can and does limit the quality and depth of the team's thinking and be dispiriting for those taking part.

In the work I've been doing for years, and will continue to do with my new venture, The Experience Business, my whole focus has been

process driven. Whether it's branding, experience design, organisational change, customer services, gallery design and layout, communications, etc., what underpins my approach is **how** I work with the team. If there is no sense of team at the end of my facilitated sessions then I have failed ... and I admit that on occasion I have, with those organisations where group participation is tokenistic rather than genuinely valued by the senior management team.

I regard my approach as a little like alchemy. In the sessions I facilitate, I bring teams together with their own periodic table of innate thinking skills and unique perspectives. The process allows them to engage and interact purposefully as equals, fuel the creative energy that is unleashed and engage with the chain reactions that ensue. We then focus, shape and channel the results into organisational gold. The gold is what you're after ... but the **process** builds great, motivated, empowered teams.

So here are some practical thinking and doing steps to help you build

teams in your organisations – but be warned, it will only work if you really want it to.

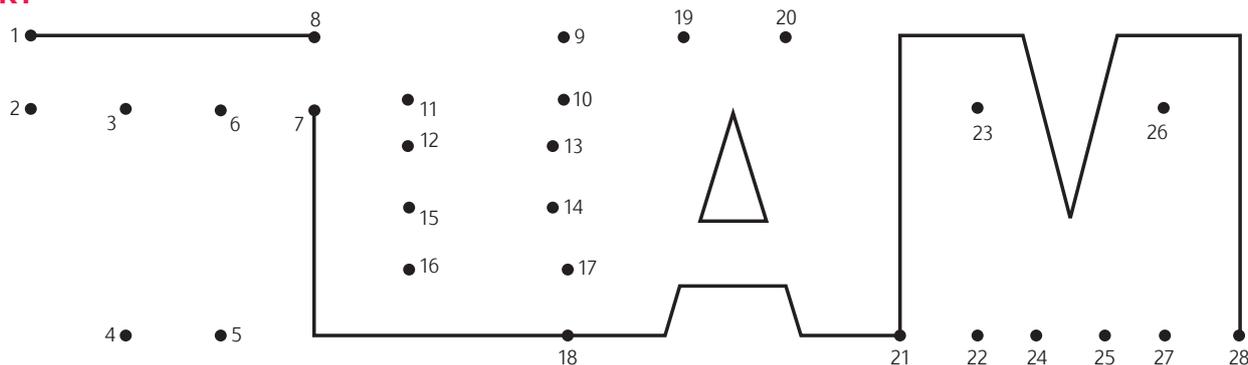
Ban 'team meetings'

I rarely hold meetings because I don't find them to be an effective format for group decision making. Usually, a meeting is where a group of people sit down round a table and talk. Entrenched organisational culture tends to take hold, patterned thinking kills fresh ideas, hierarchies assume authority, and the rest of the 'team' assume the role of the supporting cast. Sound familiar? The upshot is that team meetings (in their most traditional, agenda-driven sense) rarely build and nourish great teams.

Believe in the talent of your staff

Don't you get the feeling sometimes that you're being treated like a walking job description rather than being valued for who you are and what you can uniquely contribute? We are all individuals with unique talents and different perspectives to offer. Some of us may have natural creative abilities which could energise

START



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A case in point: Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester

I attended a creative workshop run by Lisa Baxter as part of the *All about Audiences Conference* last year. Lisa inspired me to try a new way of engaging with the whole company. Using Lisa's creative-thinking techniques, and with some additional coaching from Lisa, I initially facilitated Creative Idea Generation sessions with senior managers to develop a new communications plan. Beyond my wildest dreams, this evolved into a plan for improvements for the whole organisation and now includes all staff. The process not only encouraged everyone to think creatively, but it succeeded in creating shared purpose and a genuine sense of 'Team Royal Exchange Theatre'. The results have since been turned into a plan for improvement which will carry the organisation through the next year, if not longer.

Clare Simpson
Marketing Director, Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester



Lisa Baxter
FRSA, AMRS
Founder, The Experience Business: a new strategic insight consultancy supporting clients in shaping and evidencing their value offer to create business advantage, grow audiences and attract investment
e lisa@lisa-baxter.co.uk
w www.theexperiencebusiness.co.uk

a team with fresh thinking. Others may be more pragmatic and prefer to pay attention to the detail. Both are essential. We need to recognise and harness these talents in our colleagues in order to make the most of our collective thinking capital, and in doing so build teams where everyone feels valued and can fly.

Be open minded to new ideas and fresh ways of thinking

Ever been in a meeting where you put ideas forward but someone always has a reason why it is not a good idea – so it gets 'killed' before you've had a chance to explore its potential? This is how you kill a team. No one wants their contributions shouted down before they've even been explored. How disempowering is that?

Let go of your authority and facilitate rather than manage or direct. Empower your teams and make decisions with them, not just for them. Give them space to be the engine with you as the oil, not the driver. Create a safe space for ideas to be explored from every angle, for ideas to flow unstemmed and little eureka moments to pop up all over the place like sparklers. The positive impact on your team will be instantaneous.

Shake it up and get creative

Revitalise the 'meeting' format so everyone gets to participate fully and creatively. Post-It note brainstorming is a great way of putting everyone's ideas on the table. Try lining the walls with sheets of paper and invite people to draw their take on a problem or issue which they all present to the rest of the group. This will tap into

a broader range of perspectives that can generate more informed solutions. Call your 'meetings' something different: a team-solve, a workshop, a meet-up, a lab ... whatever will encourage a positive, active mindset.

Use creative thinking techniques

I am a passionate advocate of CPS (Creative Problem Solving) and CIG (Creative Idea Generation) because they are fantastic at generating solutions and ideas, and bring teams together.

Encourage your team to generate ideas in an atmosphere of no judgement and 'anything goes' (because ideas, after all, are risk free!). Go beyond the obvious and seek unusual, breakthrough ideas. Slap them all up somewhere where you can then start processing and making sense of them. Once all the ideas are up, organise them into themes and clusters. Now you can spot synergies and opportunities, explore potential and start shaping your solutions. Everyone feels part of the process, everyone has been heard and has had an input into shaping the solutions. If done well, with genuine commitment to the value of everyone taking part, you will have strengthened your team!

Have fun with this

Work is hard enough as it is. We are all guilty, to some degree, of taking ourselves too seriously. So try injecting playfulness into the process. Create a safe space for ideas to flow and for people to work together. Your team will connect in a much more positive way and be better able to face future challenges as a result. ●