Team Un-Building

By Richard W. Hallstein

Team building is the process of setting up a group and helping it achieve success. But can team building work when a company is on the block and jobs are on the line? One practitioner's experience suggests that it can.

The human resources p: ession has placed much emphasis recently on team building the process of forming teams and helping them work effect tively toward success. But can team building help when an organization downsizing, jobs are in danger, and morale is low? My experience suggest it can, in a process we might call "tem un-building.

What I'm about to relate in't based sing mo on scholarly research. It is practition the tracer's experience with an important in been to tervention that I think should be took and reported. A closer, more scholarly log. F. Gimb is warranted.

The plug is pulled

T was a senior vice-president with the head the now-defunct Gimbels department by the store's Pittsburgh division when the chain was put up for so in 1986 in the decimbels, we had been gaged in successful management-team building exercise for about a year. We were the and beginning to expand it when the plus divided in the control of the control of

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Responding to RIFs

By Karen Halperin Shor

Shor is with Catholic Charities, 253 East Market Street, York, PA 17403. The following report was researched and compiled by the staff of the Unemployment NOW Program of Catholic Charities.

A study was recently conducted with six York County, Pennsylvania, companies. All had dealt with reductions in force (RIFs) between 1981 and November 1988. Some were temporary reductions, due to market conditions; many workers were later called back to work.

Before the reductions, the labor force of all the companies was about 10,000. A total of 3,838 workers—from upper management to unskilled labor—were laid off. Two of the reductions involved plant shutdowns. One company had two separate layoffs.

What they did

Four companies provided departing employees with advance notice of the layoffs, ranging from one week to five months. One company gave employees 24 hours' notice, and one gave pay in lieu of notice.

All six companies helped their departing employees in some way. Support services ranged from hiring an outside agency for complete outplacement services, to providing information on how to apply for unemployment compensation and continuing benefits.

Outplacement support services provided by the companies:

- severance pay (four companies);
- extended medical benefits (three companies—one for a full year);
- clerical support such as typing and photocopying (four companies);
- use of telephones, including long distance (four companies);
- transportation allowance for interviews (two companies);
- job club/job-search program (three companies);

- help with resume writing (three sarvices w companies);
- help with interviewing skills (four all and : companies);
- time off with pay for interviews. Isite.

 (four companies—one for salaried of the formula companies on the companies of the formula companies.) employees only);
- supportive counseling, including a layoffs emotional, vocational, and financial accement (four companies).

other services included job wy had a leads; instructions on applying for unemployment compensation; and swers to most-asked questions; the content in refunds for training and educations in the content is to be content to the content of the content in the content of the content is the content of the conten tion; job-search seminars; calls by the because the HRD department to see if other companies were hiring locally; and the back r source center with job notices, local newspapers, and other resources lar you and supplemental une ployment compensation.

Four companies provided out placement services through the own staffs. Three hired outples ment agencies—one for non gaining employees only another for management staff.

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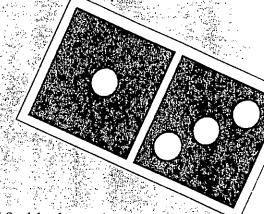
an important been to get angry and quit. But ink should book another course.

a 3,000 employees and six stores, and six stores, and six stores, for many years it held its own in management skills, and took on topical president. Lio-head competition with two problems. We were starting to show bels departing the hains in the Pittsburgh area. It is in the decade prior to my return in sale in 1986. It had been a Gimbels managener in engaged in a trainee there almost 20 years it-team building are Gimbels's market share had year. We were starting to show problems. We were starting to show over, and so we employee turn-over, and found a more competitive merchandise mix for the stores.

About a year into that process we extended the team-building effort to when the past two years before I recomber 1980. when the phyd. About two years before I re-McLagan International Plevy, now with Montgomery 3hway 36, Suffer that been hired, and was trying the business back.

in organization in danger cember 1984 as senior vice-president, we began a team-building process with re scholarly Gimbels Pittsburgh division in-the executive committee. Our progress was good: we met quarterly, set up and monitored our strategic plan, built problems. We were starting to show

> about 40 people on the next management level down. Our first outing with that group was highly successful, and we planned to continue quarterly meetings for the expanded group.



Suddenly up for sale

Then we woke up one morning and read that we were for sale. Three days later it was confirmed. BATUS was divesting itself of retail businesses. It hurt. We hadn't failed in our efforts at turning the company around; we had scarcely been given a chance to fail. We were victims of a change of strategy.

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ervices were provided on-site. One company that used both its own aff and an outplacement agency and the agency provide services

Of the four companies that used outplacement in response to their ist layoffs, three incorporated outplacement support into their comany policies. One company al-व्यdy had outplacement services as policy; another had a policy gainst outplacement support. lany of the companies did not offer extensive outplacement serices because the labor reductions rere temporary and workers had ^{ાગી}-back rights.

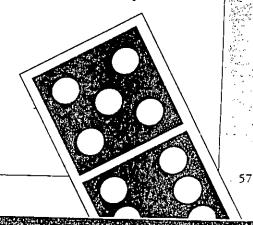
^{Wh}at you can do

Here are some suggestions on planning which services your com-^{pany} should provide to outgoing imployees, from human resource specialists who've been there.

Do your homework. Familiarize Ourself with your company's Policies and benefits. If your company is unionized, be sure to check the contract for any provisions that

- Arrange for outplacement services, either through your own staff or through an outplacement company. At the very least, services should include supportive counseling, help with resume-writing and interviewing skills, and clerical support.
- Be sure to include labor in your plans. You will need union support, and the union may have ideas you can use.
- Include spouses and families of the affected workers. It can be a big stress reliever.
- Be supportive and empathetic. This is a difficult time for the outgoing employee. Treat him or her as you would like to be treated. Arrange training for your staff on the grieving process that employees will be going through, so that HRD people understand why employees react the way they do.

- Prepare to deal with the remaining workers. There will be a lot of uncertainty and many questions; the most frequent question will be, "Am I next?" Be aware that "survivor's guilt" will affect production after a layoff.
- Don't take it personally. Many workers will be angry or bitter toward the company and the situation and may take it out on you. Be prepared for it.
- Use community resources. That's what they are for.
- Make use of the expertise of your peers. Many are willing to share insights and experience.



al, June 1989

It quickly became clear that likely buyers wouldn't need Gimbels' top management. Likewise, most of those in the next management layer would probably lose their jobs. From a business perspective, the question was, "How can we hold this group together during the transition?'

Organizations in crisis often react by denying that anyone is at risk. They fear that talking openly will only rush people into early departure. The organization plays pretend: "Let's pretend nothing's really happening. Let's pretend that it's going to be okay." That approach was tempting. We were worried and fearful, for our business and for ourselves.

Playing a hunch

After some consideration, the team made an important decision. It wasn't backed up by much research or experience; we were playing a hunch based on our beliefs and values.

We decided to continue the teambuilding process—it's only in retrospect that I refer to it as team "unbuilding"-and to bring the process into confluence with the situation. We continued regular team-building sessions through the next nine months. At each, depending on what was going on with the team at the moment, we engaged in one or more of the following:

■ Legitimization of emotions. Our purpose was to provide the managers-for themselves and for those they managed—with some rational basis for understanding the feelings they would encounter. I hired a therapist from outside to help design and facilitate sessions.

Team members were encouraged to talk openly about stages of grief, including anger, denial, bargaining, depression, and resolution. We knew people would go through those stages. We could either pretend it wasn't happening, or we could tell them what to expect of themselves and of those around them.

The response was one of relief. Many people made such statements as. "Boy, it feels good to have this on the table," and, "I was feeling so shameful for being as angry as I am. Now I know that it's OK to talk about it."

■ Values clarification. To what values would we appeal as we made decisions in the crisis? For example, under the circumstances, some employees'

performances would certainly falter. Do we put them on warning and go through with terminations if they don't shape up, ruining their chances for decent severance packages? Or do we allow for the circumstances and give them a break? We decided to be cautious about acting on problem performers, to review cases carefully, and to try to give people the benefit of the doubt.

- Critical-incident forums. We asked managers to tell us how they were handling confusing but critical issues. For example, what do we do when a key employee wants to bail out early? Our purpose was to establish a database of information on how managers were handling such issues, so that other decision makers didn't have to rely solely on their own judgment in tough spots. Generally, on difficult calls we decided to take employees' best interests into account. But if we had a superordinate interest-for example, if a crucial manager was considering leaving—we decided to offer special compensation to encourage the person to stay.
- The buddy system. Through the grapevine, we determined who was particularly hurting and assigned such individuals "buddies." For example, if someone's spouse had just lost a job also, we sent someone over to talk. But if we knew somebody needed a swift kick, we assigned a person with the leg for it. I took on an executive who at first refused to consider leaving the city for another job. He needed regular reality doses. Eventually, I got through to him.
- Communications. Many people can't tolerate uncertainty, but we tried to overcommunicate, even when we weren't certain about what was going to happen. We did a pretty fair job of telling management, unions, and hourly workers what we knew and didn't know.

The response was generally good, but our honesty led to some pretty hot meetings-people screaming at the chairman and saying, "You're lying! You do know and you're not telling us!" I have tremendous respect for the chairman, Dan Levy, who was able to tolerate being called a liar, and say simply, "I'm sorry. I don't know any

■ Support forums. Sometimes we simply announced we were ordering pizza, and invited people to drop by and just be together. People would

come and go. I loved this one. We called it "circle the wagons."

The final shock

Eventually, despite all our prepara. tion, we had a shock anyway Our competitor, May Company, bought Gimbels and put us all on the street.

But many of the memories from the very end are gratifying rather than bit. ter: BATUS offered workers generous severance packages including employee-assistance services and a jobsearch center. Hourly workers and vice-presidents stood shoulder-toshoulder peering at the job board. A person just back from a fruitless interview might suggest the opening to another job hunter.

How well did our team un-building approach work? There are some intriguing outcomes. For one thing, dealing openly with people didn't cause them to run away early. During the nine-month transition, even though most employees were not guaranteed ince de severance packages, we had less turn thon, th over at all levels of the organization in service than in the previous two years. No that some people were shocked into the sound should be some people were shocked into the sound should be doing nothing. But that kind of loyalty banges. is still astounding to me. It creeded by need any of our expectations.

Our finest hour

Now, when I visit my hometown the salespeo re's a lo ple greet me in their new jobs and we ming in talk about years past. The old manage ment team has scattered, but there have a c still a sense of camaraderie. I dont dithe exec remember ever being part of a team survival was used to the week with the visuation where I felt more respect for the week we visuation where I felt more respect for the week week. team members—or for myself.

When the end came, most member of the management team walked away the only feeling it had been our finest hour, the custome feeling it had been our finest hour, the know the

we had done something special. With corporate consolidations and likely it is job elimination so widespread, we likely it is job elimination so widespread, we of the maining might well consider how such interest mined with

The old crisis paradigm calls for a cluding people, shutting them out, and the place telling them as little as possible; the content of the cluding them as little as possible; the content of the cluding them as little as possible; the content of the cluding them as little as possible; the cluding them as little as possib values are addressed openly, and they're included as members of the wieten is to building team, they can rise to the consulting finest hour.

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