Constructing Effective Corporate Adventure Training Programs

by Michael Gass, Kathy Goldman, and Simon Priest

American businesses spend approximately $60 billion a year on both formal and informal training (Latterell 1989). This training is presented through a variety of methods, ranging from lecture style, classroom seminars to the action-oriented focus of corporate adventure training. The use of adventure experiences for corporate training has been growing across North America in recent years (Garvey, 1990; Hassinger, Stitch, & Nolan, 1986). The purpose of corporate adventure training is to improve managerial business practices through the use of carefully structured adventure experiences. While these experiences are usually designed with specific company needs in mind, most programs generally focus on team building, leadership development, or organizational change. The essence of these experiences often involves small groups (e.g., an executive board or a management unit) being challenged by unfamiliar tasks that are somehow associated with work situations. These tasks can include initiatives, low and high ropes course activities, or outdoor adventure experiences. Successful completion of these tasks usually requires the combination of a variety of skills (e.g., leadership, problem-solving, decision-making, judgement, innovative thinking, commitment, self-confidence, trust, cooperation, communication, conflict resolution).

Paralleling the growth of this industry is an increasing concern that some corporate adventure training programs have little or no application to the business workplace. Company representatives often ask whether the training will actually bring about changes and what influence these changes will have on the company structure. If the bottom line for a company is profit, and if corporate adventure training might not have an influence on profit margins, then why would a client be willing to pay for it? As stated by Gall (1987):

Let's not kid ourselves. Unless upper management can see that your sailing adventure in the Florida Keys paid off in a big way, there aren't going to be any more tanned work groups in February. Evidence of these (adventure) programs' return falls into two very distinct categories: the hard dollars-and-cents figures and the soft, but no less important, personal impact. (p. 47)

Many corporate adventure training programs do offer valuable educational experiences that can improve business practices (e.g., Gall, 1987; Roland, 1981). With the large number of these programs in existence, how do businesses determine ones that will produce desired results? While there are a variety of answers, the authors believe that effective corporate adventure training programs generally have four characteristics in common: (1) context, (2) continuity, (3) consequences and (4) care.

Context refers to the process of structuring key elements during the experience in order to create the necessary connections between the adventure experience and the workplace. Continuity is the insurance that the learning that occurs in the adventure experience will be connected to future learning experiences available for employees in the workplace. Consequences address the fact that the outcomes of adventure experiences are not artificially contrived but provide the learners with valid information and feedback on their actions. Care

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refers to the ability of the corporate adventure program staff to create physically and emotionally safe environments where the potential for growth is unlimited.

This article addresses these four characteristics in regard to constructing effective corporate adventure training programs. Each characteristic is addressed in order to stimulate thought on how corporate adventure training programs can attain optimal levels of quality and effectiveness from the perspective of providers as well as consumers.

Context

One important component in effective corporate adventure programs is the development of parallel structures between the adventure experience and the workplace. While the specifics of each environment differ, the context within each one must be the same in order for appropriate change to occur. Adventure experiences inherently possess key elements that create a successful medium for change (e.g., natural consequences), but failing to design the context of the activity to mirror the workplace creates programs that produce "hit or miss" strategies. Adventure programs may develop problem-solving or communications skills, but unless these skills have specific application to the company's current context, the gains are not likely to translate into improved performance.

The success in creating an appropriate context for beneficial change centers on the creation of common "isomorphic" connections (e.g., Bacon, 1983; Gass, 1985, 1991) between the adventure and business environments. Originally developed by scientists and mathematicians (Hofstadler, 1979), the concept of isomorphs demonstrates how elements that are not identically common, yet are analogously similar, can create change when appropriately linked together.

The following example illustrates the concept of isomorphs using a low ropes course element called the "Spider's Web" (Rohnke, 1989; Webster, 1989). While certain parts of this actual description have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the company, this initiative was structured by a corporate adventure program to specifically address issues confronting managers of a home health care agency. The major concerns facing this corporation were: (1) to improve an already productive and efficient delivery of services for elderly home care, and (2) to provide these services in a caring manner. The corporation was experiencing a contradiction between these goals and was looking for the corporate adventure program to assist them in providing strategies on how these concepts could work synergistically rather than in opposition to one another. The activity was presented as follows:

Subcontract with WebCare International

Background: Your company has signed a new subcontract to perform health services for an organization called WebCare. This company serves as a communications link for various health service delivery agencies but is having difficulty providing services in a caring manner on schedule to elderly individuals. Based on your company's outstanding record of "providing services for personal care," WebCare is offering a pilot contract to your organization to see if you can solve their dilemma.

Group Task: The task of your employees here is to demonstrate a model delivery and transfer service solving the complex problem facing WebCare. The contract you've signed is to pass employees through the complex system in a caring and efficient manner. To accomplish this task, each employee in your group must pass through one of the holes without any member touching the web. While all parts of this contract are connected, employees have their own "hole of responsibility" to pass through. Only one person may pass through her/his designated hole. Once someone has passed through the hole, that part of the contract is completed and sending someone through that hole again would just be a replication of services.

Financing: Because of recent fluctuations in the stock market, money and gold are no longer a means for financial transactions. A more reliable and stable commodity (80 M & M's) is being used for payment. The contract you've set stipulates that you need to accomplish this task in 25 minutes. Since a premium is placed on providing services on schedule by WebCare, you will receive a 25% bonus if you complete the task in under 20 minutes. However, you lose four M & M's.
for every minute it takes after 25 minutes to complete the task.

**Timing:** While time is crucial for your project, caring for the network of patients is even more important. Since 100% effectiveness for caring is required by this project, if anyone in your program brushes up against the web of services while passing or being passed through their hole of responsibility, the entire group must start over (Note: the time schedule does not start over!). The project is completed when each person has safely passed through her/his hole of responsibility without anyone touching the web.

**Summary:** Are there any questions? Remember, (1) once someone goes through one hole it may not be used again, and (2) if someone touches the web, the entire group must begin the project over and the time continues. If there are no questions, your time on this project begins now.

In this exercise, the context of this adventure activity was framed around two critical isomorphs for the company: (1) the timely and efficient delivery of services for elderly home care and (2) the caring manner in which these services are delivered. The construction of these isomorphs created a context in which the energies, focuses, and outcomes of successfully completing the adventure initiative provided the company with useable strategies for resolving its specific issues. The similar structures of the two environments created the common context for beneficial change.

It is important to note that the structural framework of metaphors created for this company was appropriate for this situation given the needs, goals, and directions of the company. This same context might not have been appropriate for other corporations given their particular needs. Corporate adventure training programs that effectively create beneficial change for organizations need to be adept at creating structural isomorphic frameworks that address the needs of the client within the context of the company.

**Context**

Is an initial diagnostic interview and observation part of the training program?
Have program objectives been identified from a needs assessment of the clients?
Have those identified objectives been prioritized in relationship to one another?
Have adventure activities been selected to meet those objectives “naturally”? 
Are there strong isomorphic links between training activities and program needs? 
Does success/failure in training activities mirror similar work-related outcomes? 
Has a structural framework been developed that strengthens isomorphic links? 
Has time been set aside to reinforce learning through a debriefing session?

**Continuity**

While the context of an activity pertains to how present learning experiences address current issues facing a company, continuity (e.g., Dewey, 1938) focuses on how this learning will address a company’s future needs. Successful businesses, as well as effective social institutions, are constantly in a state of evolution and change. Effective training programs structure experiences that take future organizational development into account, including the need for employees to change and grow as the company adapts to future fluctuations in the business environment. While structuring the context and continuity of effective corporate adventure training can represent different concerns, they are inextricably connected in the development of successful programs.

For example, one company contracted with an adventure training program to assist with a problem in which their employees were afraid to share their ideas in work groups for fear that their ideas would be ridiculed or stolen. The training program addressed this issue by structuring experiences that created contexts where new alternative behaviors (e.g., early identification of valid issues, trust, sharing, open collaboration with joint recognition) occurred and replaced the previous dysfunctional behaviors. However, the training program also recognized that such an innovation would drastically affect the corporate climate and culture, and the company had to be equipped with processes to adapt and evolve as changes from this innovation occurred within the workplace. Therefore, appropriate learning processes, which would permit continued growth as the company evolved, were included in the programming. One example was to make group members responsible for establishing their own norms in confronting the adventure experience and the workplace issues (e.g., confidentiality, no “putdowns,” dealing with the here and now, speaking only for oneself). The process the group members used in establishing these norms (e.g., consensus decision-making) served as an appropriate means for dealing with future issues and provided continuity as the organization changed. This process is connected to, but distinct from, the context, i.e., the need to develop spe-
specific new behaviors appropriate for the current workplace.

As highlighted in this example, there is little benefit in promoting certain ideas in corporate adventure training programs if these principles will not be used once the employees return to their work environment, or continue to be relevant as the company evolves. When aspects of adventure experiences are: (1) successfully integrated into the workplace (context) and (2) structured in a manner where learning is relevant to change in the corporation (continuity), then the training program has a meaningful transfer of learning.

To help outline how learning from adventure experiences can achieve this type of meaningful change and create continuity, Gass (1985, 1991) has outlined three transfer processes: (1) specific transfer, (2) non-specific transfer, and (3) metaphoric transfer:

Specific transfer occurs when the actual products of learning (e.g., skills such as canoeing, belaying, reading) are generalized to habits and associations so that use of these skills are applicable to other learning situations. Non-specific transfer occurs when the specific processes of learning are generalized into attitudes and principles for future use by the learner (e.g., cooperation, environmental awareness). Metaphoric transfer occurs when parallel processes in one learning situation become analogous to learning in another different, yet similar situation. (Gass, 1991, p. 6)

Specific transfer can be associated with traditional training, such as learning typing skills in preparation for secretarial duties. One example of this type of transfer from adventure training might be the use of ropes courses or rock climbing to help people who tend to be an analytical thinker. While participating in the adventure experience, this employee develops more creative lateral thinking techniques (e.g., brainstorming, attribute listing) and enjoys success in solving difficult and unusual problems. The employee has become more effective at solving problems with a new repertoire of skills. When faced with an opportunity to integrate these new skills with different problems at the office, the employee successfully transfers the new-found (non-specific) skill to the workplace.

The last transfer process is metaphoric transfer, where the adventure experience provides parallel analogies for future learning in the workplace. Consider the following actual experiences as examples of this type of transfer:

- Twelve members of a research and development team for a small company are given the task of getting their entire group over a fourteen-foot high wall without the use of any props. Two of their members are temporarily blindfolded and three are not allowed to speak. They quickly find that the crux of the problem is not in getting the first person over, nor in helping the half of the group with “special” needs, but in finding a way to assist the last stranded person. In their haste, they have failed to find a solution to the real problem and have been distracted by immediate superficial problems. The outcome is typical of their problem-solving sessions back at the “drawing board,” where they often fail to give an appropriate amount of time to assess a situation before implementing an action plan.

- Forty feet above the ground, the personnel manager for a local educational institution is frozen with indecision. Standing on top of a telephone pole, her task is to leap through the air to catch a swinging trapeze bar! Protected by a helmet, harness, and safety line, the manager is unsure of her ability to reach the trapeze, although she had jumped the same distance.

**Continuity**

Can new learning be appropriately applied within the adventure training program?

Can expected changes from adventure training be integrated into the workplace?

Does the training teach processes that allow participants to adapt to changes?

Is the appropriate type of transfer used to enhance future learning for the clients?

Are clients encouraged to build their own metaphoric connections to programs?

Are individual learning styles accommodated by the training staff?

Are appropriate follow-up experiences scheduled as part of the training program?

Are strategies used to help clients implement and reinforce learning after the training?
at ground level. Now high in the trees, she recognizes the similarity between her inability to act on the pole and her reluctance to make a choice at work when faced with risks. With the support of her co-workers, she gathers up her courage into one deliberate attempt. She soars through the air and grasps the bar, remarking that if she can accomplish this seemingly insurmountable task, then she can deal with the issues confronting her on the job, given the same type of support from her colleagues.

- The board of directors from a large corporation is “lost” in a cave system deep underground. As their headlamps begin to lose power, the facilitator offers the CEO an opportunity to lead the group from the darkness into safety! This becomes an analogy for the daily operation of their corporation where errors may mean delays in finding appropriate policy directions. Faced with the reality of the problem, the CEO follows normal procedures and calls on various members of the board for their input in order to attempt to achieve a democratic consensus. As members become increasingly nervous, the CEO recognizes the need for a different leadership style and makes an autocratic decision. The board follows along and a crack of light opens ahead just in time. The CEO’s success in changing leadership styles provides a valuable learning opportunity for the CEO and board members in seeing how growth can occur when leaders are empowered with the flexibility to change leadership styles.

These examples represent metaphors commonly found in adventure training. The value of these learning experiences stems from each client’s ability to connect metaphors to her or his workplace. In order for this to occur, metaphors should be presented in a language that is understood by the particular client and relates to how learning in the particular adventure experience will foster future learning in the workplace. The Leadership Challenge by Kouzes and Posner (1987) is one published source that uses the language commonly found in many corporate training as well as adventure learning environments.

**Consequences**

In the outdoors, the consequences are truly “real,” providing people with opportunities to learn from their mistakes. Minor misadventures arising during problem solving or decision making often result in inconveniences like failing to accomplish a group objective at a ropes course, getting wet in a river, or falling on a rock climb. Success brings rewards like adrenaline highs, the satisfaction of achievement, and recognition by those who really matter—one’s self and one’s co-workers.

The physical tasks at the core of outdoor development courses are real tasks which present real problems to real people in real times with real constraints. [They] are so designed that the manager will experience the practical outcome of his/her own actions or decisions, thereby creating a learning process which could lead him/her to modify his/her behavior or options. (Bank, 1985, p. 9)

The results of their [managers’] actions are immediately apparent, providing clear evidence of their performance and a basis for feedback, questioning, and experiment. Although outdoor tasks are not normal, they are inescapably real. Managing an outdoor situation is like managing life—it is full of unpredictable events and people. A result has to be achieved and there are only limited resources and time available. Because tasks are so different to the normal work situation, the underlying management processes are laid bare. An impetuous decision to act outside an agreed, overall plan results in a group being in the wrong place at the wrong time—a clear lesson on the consequences of committing resources without adequate communication or regard to the overall situation. (Cresick & Williams, 1979, p. 3)

The vivid reality of true consequences is often a central characteristic that distinguishes adventure training from a wide variety of other corporate learning exercises. In most classroom seminars, it is common practice for managers to learn through lectures and simulations. The risks in these indoor exercises usually involve play money or rewards, and punishment directed and assigned by the facilitator. The consequences of actions (or inactions) for these activities are imagined and may hold little meaning for people involved with classroom training sessions.

In adventure experiences, participants are uncertain about the outcome. They are in an unfamiliar environment, facing novel situations that are often thrilling and difficult. For these reasons, their attention is likely to be focused and their perceptions heightened. Following the experience, they are often left with an empowered vision and critical feedback on their newly learned skills. Because of the unique nature of adventure experiences, these activities also add a learning opportunity where no one group member brings any special expertise to these activities. This can place participants in equal positions and break down hierarchical barriers, as well as apprehensions that often can exist in organizations.

Since one unique aspect of effective corporate adventure training programs is the ability to deliver experiences with immediate and powerful learning consequences, consideration ought to be given to how such consequences are structured. In short, consequences should: (1) be tailored to meet training objectives, (2) be valued with the perspective that outcomes often arise from learning from “mistakes” (King, 1988), (3) be educationally relevant and appropriate (e.g., not just seen as a reward or punishment), (4) arise naturally from the setting and not be dictated by a trainer or facilitator, (5) be real but within acceptable and recov-
Consequences

Are the educational theories and philosophies for the adventure training clearly understood?
Is it clear as to what makes team building process different or special as a way to learn?
Is it clear as to what aspects of adventures make them more effective than conventional training?
Is it clear as to what role staff take in dictating the consequences of each learning experience?
Are these consequences of learning linked to achieving the training objectives?
Are these consequences of learning linked to providing appropriate feedback?
Are opportunities present to learn consequentially from mistakes and successes?
Are consequences structured to match personal experience levels for each client?

Care

Current writings on adventure programming examine the ethical (Hunt, 1990, 1991) and safety practices (Priest & Dixon, 1990) surrounding the responsibilities of adventure trainers. Adherence to these or similar guidelines is one means of protecting clients from physical, emotional, or social injury and optimizing their learning experiences. Obviously, consumers should be skeptical of adventure programs that violate these or similar standards designed to insure the appropriate level of care. Providers should be fully aware of common professional practice so that they operate within acceptable limits. In addressing these “standards for care,” there are six general principles:

(1) Corporate adventure programs work with perceived risks rather than dealing in actual dangers. To this end, they employ state-of-the-art safety procedures (e.g., accident responses relative to remote locations, “spotting” clients when above ground level) and equipment (e.g., PFDs, ropes, helmets, harnesses) to keep dangerous aspects of the adventure at controlled or minimal levels without destroying the perception of risk. Activities without safety backup systems (e.g., bungi jumping, fire walking), or activities not performed according to safe and common practices (e.g., climbing without helmets), should not be part of an adventure training program. The extra danger is simply not needed, since the presence of perceived risk with clients unfamiliar with these tasks creates the necessary conditions for learning to occur. In addition, adventure programs should undergo a thorough annual safety review by a team of external experts intended to improve program procedures.

(2) Programs should operate under the axiom of “challenge by choice” (Rohnke, 1989), where clients have the freedom to choose their level of participation and select the level of risk they feel comfortable attempting. One common misconception surrounding corporate adventure training programs is that they are viewed as “survival encounters” where everyone must complete all the activities. When participants’ power to decide for themselves is taken away by forcing their involvement, they are likely to attribute success or failure to the person who made them do it rather than to themselves. Not only is this an educational weakness, but it may also border on negligence (i.e., injured people can claim they were forced to comply against their will). If attendance at a training program is mandated by an employer, the “challenge by choice” doctrine provides a positive way to give control to participants and allow them to regain self-respect and feel comfortable within their group.

Programs are strongly advised to allow options for participants to pass and not coerce involvement. Not only is this stance ethically and educationally appropriate, Hunt (1991) has explored the negative implications for the field as a valid profession if standards like this are not accepted.

(3) In order to have clients more invested and responsible for their learning, they should be actively engaged in activities where their competence and efforts have a direct influence on the activity’s outcome. The more a program does to enhance the relationship between competence and outcome, the more effective the learning. Consider two kinds of rafting excursions: one with a motorized raft, maneuvered solely by a corporate trainer, and the other with paddles held by the clients. In the former example, success or failure is attributed to the corporate trainer and the outcome is determined purely by chance since the clients have no control other than to “hang on.” In the latter example, they are fully responsible for the fate of their raft and, as a result, the experience is far more challenging and likely to be empowering since they “own” their successes and setbacks.

This same principle applies to the way programs are designed, delivered, and debriefed. Clients should take a vested role in the planning process, as well as in the procedures to protect their own safety (e.g., belay-
Care

Do staff have the appropriate qualifications and experience to facilitate training?
Are staff flexible in leadership style, instructional manner, and activity choice?
Are experiences debriefed? Why, in what manner, how often, and how soon?
What types of real dangers do clients face and how are these risks controlled?
To what extent are clients coerced or encouraged to participate in activities?
Are clients informed and educated about the physical and emotional risks involved in the program?
What safety procedures are used to guard against physical and emotional injuries?
Is a peer safety review conducted annually by experts from outside the program?
Are clients included in planning their own program and in maintaining safety?

people have identical learning needs and since individual learning styles vary, staff should be capable of instructing in different ways. Failure to do so neglects those who need more challenge (e.g., “bored”) and those who need less challenge (e.g., “anxious”; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Hebb, 1972). Since adventure experiences are very much a state of mind that fluctuates according to clients’ perceptions of situational risks and personal competence, staff need to provide a variety of options for clients. This may be as simple as providing several different rock climbs at one cliff site or as complex as designing a number of similar, yet progressively more difficult ropes course elements so clients may choose from a range of challenges in the

same activity.

(5) Ethical adventure programs should avoid “rescuing” clients by giving away the answers to difficult tasks, solving the problems they encounter, or making their decisions for them. This approach maintains a true spirit of adventure (i.e., by keeping the outcome uncertain). One exception to this rule is when real dangers are present and where clients appear to be heading for an accident; then trainers should obviously intervene and assist as necessary.

(6) Programs should maximize the educational potential that arises from powerful adventure experiences by debriefing frequently and as immediately after the experience as appropriate. During debriefing sessions, trainers should guide clients through a reflection on their experiences relative to the objectives of the program. Debriefing should concentrate on identifying: (1) specific instances or examples of the learning objectives in action, (2) the impact of those experiences on the group’s effectiveness and on each individual member’s feelings, (3) the new learning that comes from the analysis of both successful and unsuccessful experiences in relation to impact and feelings, (4) how that new learning may be transferred to the workplace, and (5) what commitment will be made to change behaviors for the better next time a similar opportunity presents itself.

Programs should avoid downplaying the importance of debriefing by postponing it until later or omitting it entirely. These programs can be enjoyable, but learning from these experiences is limited. For debriefing to be effective, specific ground rules must be established to protect the clients from social and emotional injury. This should include group norms that are validated and agreed upon by all members (e.g., the right to pass or not disclose feelings if desired, protection of confidentiality for those who do share, speaking only for oneself and not others, valuing feedback from peers, avoiding “putdown” statements). Finally, programs should include follow-up visits to assist clients with their re-entry to the corporate culture and to help them integrate appropriate changes.

Conclusions

Of course, it’s going to be nearly impossible to convince some skeptics that sailing, white water rafting, or scaling a mountain can have positive effects on how
people perform in the workplace, let alone influence a financial statement. But outdoor experiential learning is still a fairly new field and has plenty of room to grow and to demonstrate its strength. (Gall, 1987, p. 48)

This closing statement is from an article written five years ago describing the state of corporate adventure training programs. Has the field evolved as a profession since this statement was made? In a recent article, Prud'homme (1990) outlines several successful corporate adventure training programs, but describes the field as “America’s growing lust for sweat, ‘experiential learning,’ a mostly physical approach to learning by doing” (p. 62). In a related article, Chipkin (1990) lists corporate adventure training programs in the same vein as pep-rally-style talks, herbal wraps, and firepit walking.

Change in the way corporate adventure training programs are viewed by businesses and organizations will only happen when consumers are able to recognize what these programs can truly accomplish and are able to differentiate between programs that will make a difference and those that will not. In an attempt to begin to outline key program attributes, the authors have created the categories of context, continuity, consequences, and care. Professionals are encouraged to use these as a guide for self-evaluation and as a means to enhance their current program efforts.

Most importantly, professionals are encouraged to begin an open dialogue about advancing these initial considerations. While it is important to establish guidelines that enhance corporate adventure training, it is equally important for professionals to network and collaborate for the development of the field. It is this spirit of joint collaboration, not isolated competition, that will lead to furthering the systemic validation and establishment of corporate adventure training as a truly respected and evolving profession.

References


