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Meetings tickle funny bones to teach teamwork

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Management at Redmond-based AT&T Wireless doesn't mind if employees get a case of the giggles.

In fact, the managers there are among a growing number of Seattle-area management teams who encourage it. Across the region, they're holding corporate meetings where employees laugh together, design airplanes that will never sell and create assembly lines for machines that won't work.

It's all in the name of company communication, said Andrew McMasters, co-founder of Seattle's Jet City Improv. **AT&T Wireless Group**, Seattle's RealNetworks and Airborne Express have all hired McMasters' improvisational comedy troupe, operating as nonprofit corporation Wing-It Productions, not just as entertainers, but as corporate trainers.

Wing-It is just one of the new breed of corporate trainers and speakers that relies on the tools of comedy and group participation to get their point across.

While some people may be fired up by a dynamic speaker and leave the session with a renewed sense of purpose, too often the effects fade away in a few days or weeks. On the other hand, participatory workshops have a sustained impact on the people who do them, says Mac MacDonald, a screen and television actor who offers a "motivational therapy" program through his "LYFE" Enhancement Co. in Seattle. He points to a portfolio of letters he has received years after giving a workshop, telling him about the long-term changes people have seen in their organizations.

McMasters' comedy troupe has found that a number of improv routines it does on stage translates into teamwork training for working groups.

"What a number of people are finding is that when you put together a team and that team works together and becomes a tight-knit group, that team will produce better product," McMasters said. "The big by-word people are using is 'interpersonal communications.' The goal is to get that team to work together better. And how do you get that team - for want of a better word - hard-wired?"

In one of McMasters' training sessions, employees are paired so that the two can't work separately. The exercise is called the "Arms Scene." One person stands in front and gets to do all the talking, but their arms must remain behind their back. Their teammate extends their arms from behind and becomes the hands and arms for the "person."

"You've got two people who are doing physical activities who are trying to communicate on some level," McMasters said. "One of them (is only) able to speak, the other one only able to do the movements. It's a funny visual joke. It looks great. Everybody ends up laughing. But those two people are learning how to communicate with each other and learning how to act as one."

Other theater games, such as "Dr. Know-It-All," where a crew of three line up and answer questions from the audience as a singular person, or "One-Word-Story" which can involve as many as five or 10 people in a team are another means of getting people to concentrate on listening to each other while building group cohesion within the team. Each person adds one word in turn as the stories progress.

"You've got to let go of who you are and feed the group because it's the group mindset that's important - not your individual mind," said McMasters, who holds a bachelor's degree in theater from Temple University in Philadelphia and a master's degree from the University of Washington's Professional Actor Training Program.

Wing-It workshops draw regularly from the same bag of tricks, he said. What they bring to any given meeting, however, depends on what the company wants to accomplish, because each training session is tailored to the particular company McMasters says.

Silvana Clark also alters her bag of tricks to cater to different companies. The author and former recreational supervisor from Bellingham who works through Seattle Bookings, one of several speakers bureaus, uses a variety of hands-on activities to drive home her points. She asks meeting attendees to launch paper airplanes made from cards with their names on them into large meeting groups for networking purposes. She does team-building exercises where groups make and market "exercise machines" from a collection of plastic plumbing pipe that she provides.

"I talk about how we all have special talents, and how you can take an idea and use it lots of different ways," Clark said.

"Each group will get this bag of PVC pipes and joints and they have maybe 10 minutes to develop an exercise machine out of it and then create an infomercial and sell it to the other groups," she said.

"People who aren't that outgoing like to create the machine, so they're putting it all together, and the outgoing ones, when the infomercial comes, they think that's just great. It's so low-key and so silly - there's no right way to make an exercise machine out of PVC pipe, so nobody feels like their machine was less effective than the other ones."

Afterward she can illustrate the point that each team member had their own piece to contribute to meet the goal.

"If every team member was outgoing and yelling and screaming, 'It's just \$19.95,' you wouldn't get much done. It draws the point home." said Clark.

Whatever activity they bring to the meetings, the trainers agree that scaling the group down to a manageable size is key to achieving desired results.

Reach the Business Journal at 206-583-0701 or seattle@bizjournals.com.

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