

Olaf B. Tietz

Contents

Introduction	674
People Perspective	675
Work as a Cultural and Social Activity	675
Understanding the Drivers of Work Satisfaction	675
Why Are Cultural and Social Activities Important?	676
Resistance Against Cultural and Social Activities	676
Understanding Cultural and Social Activities as an Internal Marketing Campaign	677
Operational Perspective	678
Taking Advantage of the “Self-Perpetuating Impulse” of a Company	678
Finding the Right Approach for Developing Cultural and Social Events	678
The Bottom-Up Approach	679
Classify Cultural and Social Activities	679
Guidelines for Developing Cultural and Social Activities	681
Risk Perspective	682
Economic Perspective	683
Cultural and Social Activities: Retention Tools	684
What Is It?	684
Why Is It Important?	685
Activities	685
Responsibilities of HR Manager	695
Dos and Don'ts	695
Dos	695
Don'ts	696
Outlook	697

O.B. Tietz (✉)

Carl Benz Academy – First Global Cloud Academy GmbH, Berlin, Germany

e-mail: ot@erp-berlin.com; olaf.tietz@benz-academy.org

Abstract

This section addresses the topic of cultural and social activities in the context of employee engagement in the workplace. Cultural and social activities are company-organized events designed to improve bonding and communication among team members in a way that will lead to higher levels of employee satisfaction and retention and improved organizational performance.

This chapter looks at the drivers of work satisfaction and provides guidance on finding the right approach for the development of successful cultural and social activities. Recommendations include a bottom-up approach with strong employee involvement, tailoring activities to workforce characteristics, adapting to cultural circumstances, linking events to brand values, maintaining the voluntary nature of events, ensuring management acceptance and support, and maintaining authenticity. A specific example is presented in the form of the retention tool “employee relations,” and the section concludes with practical “dos and don’ts” for managers considering the implementation of cultural and social activities in their own organizations.

Keywords

Employee/work satisfaction: appreciation, fairness, brand, team • Bottom-up approach/input/co-creation • Communication • Team spirit • Voluntary participation • Building/strengthening relationships

Introduction

Employee engagement affects the performance and financial results of organizations, as well as the lives of its employees. One of its key building blocks is the interaction and connection of individual employees with co-workers. These connections, or social and cultural exchanges, play an important role in the building of relationships among employees and the development of a sense of team and belonging in the workplace.

At their core, cultural and social activities are designed to bring people together, be it in the work place, the community, or the home. They give people the chance to share experiences, to connect with one another, and to develop interpersonal relationships. Indeed, in the broader context of societies and the people within them, work itself can also be regarded as an important social or cultural activity.

In contrast to team development, which is focused on building skills or competences for individuals within workplace teams, cultural and social activities are designed to facilitate interaction among employees beyond their normal or day-to-day work exchanges. Their goal is relationship building rather than skill enhancement.

In this chapter, the author will look at the drivers of work satisfaction and their role in supporting the achievement of organizational goals. In particular, this chapter

will focus on cultural and social activities in this context and how they can be applied to the workplace in a meaningful and effective manner. Different perspectives are presented, from the people perspective to the operational, risk, and economic perspectives. A practical example is presented in the form of the tool “employee relations,” which is designed specifically with the goal of employee retention in mind.

People Perspective

Work as a Cultural and Social Activity

Cultural and social activities are terms which are fundamentally linked to the character of human beings. In this respect, work itself should be understood as an important cultural and social activity. It provides people with the opportunity to take part in a global system of creation, exchange of products and services, creativity, communication, and individual, social, and cultural development. Within this context, it gives individuals the feeling of being part of something, whether as a member of a working team where an individual receives appreciation (e.g., in the form of income and education), being proud to participate in something that is meaningful (e.g., working on social or environmental causes), or simply communicating with others through the course of daily work.

Understanding the Drivers of Work Satisfaction

Work satisfaction is incredibly important for the health and life satisfaction of human beings. Commonly known drivers of work satisfaction include a sense of team, income/compensation and benefits, perceived fairness in engagement, loyalty, and appreciation. Despite a generally high level of awareness regarding these drivers, the relevance of the individual items is not necessarily well distinguished. The more tangible factor “income,” for example, is often the first to receive attention from employees and management, rather than other more intangible drivers such as “appreciation.” But it is precisely these intangible drivers, in particular “appreciation,” which should be understood as the more critical underlying factor. Take the following examples:

1. When considering the factor “fairness,” it is about the combination of fair salaries and the opportunities granted to employees to acquire higher skills through training or professional studies. In this context, the underlying factor of “appreciation” stimulates an individual’s personal wish to develop their own abilities to become more valuable for the company and to be recognized by the company for their efforts.

2. When considering the factor “team,” it is about the good relationships among some team members and of the dynamics of the team in a broader sense. The underlying factor of “appreciation” also has the power to significantly and positively influence the sense of team. Respect and awareness, or in other words, a level of appreciation for each other, is a strong force in the everyday communication and routines of a team.

These interrelationships between the different drivers of work satisfaction demonstrate the potential of a single driver to both directly and indirectly affect the other drivers. This chapter describes a distinct tool that influences several of these aforementioned drivers – cultural and social activities.

Why Are Cultural and Social Activities Important?

In the work environment, cultural and social activities usually refer to company-organized events that target mainly general staff in an organization. These events are designed to improve bonding and communication among group members in a way that will lead to improved employee and organizational performance and productivity and higher levels of employee satisfaction and retention. Other benefits can include:

- Improved morale
- Greater sense of vision and purpose
- Enhanced communication among employees
- Greater information sharing and exchange across team or departmental boundaries (and among different levels of an organization)
- Improved problem-solving skills via greater cooperation and stronger relationships

In addition to these “formally” organized activities, informal socialization and networking also play an important role in building relationships and developing a positive sense of team. Organizations can also support the development of these kinds of events by encouraging the involvement of employees in activities, events, or groups in the community (either directly or by providing them with time or resources to do so), so that benefits can be obtained by individuals in the organization.

Resistance Against Cultural and Social Activities

Knowing that work itself can be a strong cultural and social platform for its participants, it is important to understand that there can also be resistance against additional cultural and social activities offered by the organization. In a company

where many of the key expectations and desires of employees are already met, it is likely that employee and management satisfaction are already at high levels. In these circumstances, a higher acceptance for cultural and social activities exists, and it should be easy to find the time to organize and engage in such activities. If the opposite is true, however, and employee and management satisfaction is low, discussions are much more likely to head toward “if and what” questions, or the reasons “not to” participate. Furthermore, the participation rate in these kinds of events (defined as attendance without pressure) is both highly linked and an indicator for the retention rate of the organization.

Understanding Cultural and Social Activities as an Internal Marketing Campaign

If there is resistance against cultural and social activities within an organization, the employees’ perception of the company’s reputation is probably already tarnished, and employers will need to find means of identifying and rectifying the source(s) of these perceptions. In order for employees to be really engaged or committed in their work, they need to be proud of the brand or the organization they are working for. Why shouldn’t employees receive the same level of appreciation as customers? Modern human resource-related concepts such as employer branding are built upon the argument that a company’s brand is incoherent if the customers’ well-being is omnipresent, while the employees’ well-being is disregarded. Furthermore, the more successful a brand is in persuading its employees that it is a good employer, the more likely it is to attract (and keep) desirable candidates in the long term. And of course, it is hard to argue the prevailing logic that more satisfied employees (with real belief in the brand) are more likely to present a company and its products in a positive light than those who are less satisfied or less motivated. Employee and management satisfaction correlates positively with customer satisfaction, and higher levels of employee satisfaction ensures greater chances of organizational success in the long term.

This brand-related aspect of social and cultural activities is best placed into the hands of the experienced brand ambassadors that can be found in the marketing department of the organization. They are best placed to take up the responsibility of transmitting the values of the brand into the organization of cultural and social events. In fact, cultural and social activities should be understood as an internal marketing campaign – that is, a “normal” marketing campaign, but one whose audience is more inside the organization than external to it. It’s an additional bonus that such events also have the capacity to reach beyond their internal market in an indirect manner. For example, improved employee morale leads to greater pride in the brand and likely a higher level of connection with the brand. Employees have a role to play in building a brand in the broader market, by how they reflect and perpetuate the values of the brand, not only from the perspective of a company selling products or services but also as an employer.

Operational Perspective

Taking Advantage of the “Self-Perpetuating Impulse” of a Company

Cultural and social events have the power to increase employee satisfaction and engagement and improve the performance of a company. They can be especially important in times of lower commitment and satisfaction, where they can provide employees with positive memories in place of negative ones.

In order to distinguish the need and extent to which cultural and social activities should be developed, the normal distribution of a company’s satisfaction survey results comes into use. The idea of normal distribution in satisfaction measurements is described in greater detail in ► [Chap. 37, “Engagement and Retention: Essentials of Employee Surveys.”](#) The following suggestion might appear illogical but bearing in mind the risk that a well-intended effort is not always accepted by dissatisfied employees and can cause the compounding of a negative atmosphere, a company should make use of what is called the “self-perpetuating impulse” (the resistance idea was introduced in section “[People Perspective: Resistance Against Cultural and Social Activities](#)”). When comparing the satisfaction across all departments in a company, smaller cultural and social activities should be considered for departments where the satisfaction rate is already high. Their spirit and engagement will create a pull for others in the organization. If other departments feel that it is unfair or inappropriate to provide the funding for those events to the “happy departments,” this could be an opportunity for fostering the spirit of initiative among the less-satisfied departments. Employees in these departments then have the opportunity to recommend a better concept that they support and can actually reaffirm. Creating commitment and interest in a project is the first step to installing a company’s self-perpetuating dynamic. This approach may look like a reaction, but in truth it is proactive. In other words, dissatisfied departments are activated to become more active. Of course, the management has a critical role to play in convincingly supporting such initiatives if they are going to be taken seriously by employees.

Finding the Right Approach for Developing Cultural and Social Events

There are many perspectives to be considered when developing cultural and social events. These are, for example:

1. Building a strong employer brand
2. Being better than the competitors (better – not more!)
3. Respecting employees’ desires
4. Tailoring activities and events to the needs or desires of different groups of employees within an organization
5. Using “self-running” approaches – learn from social networking

Regardless of which of these perspectives is considered most valuable, the most successful approach is an internal market one that aims to answer the following question:

What would you do if your employees were your customers and you wanted to convince them with your “product”?

A trial and error approach involving subjective adaptation of external (customer-oriented) marketing would no doubt eventually lead to an understanding of how cultural and social events should be best designed at a particular organization. A much more strategic approach, however, would be a bottom-up one that takes research, co-creation methods, and need analyses into account. Financial and workload restrictions should also be carefully considered.

The Bottom-Up Approach

Cultural and social activities can only have a meaningful and positive impact on overall employee satisfaction if the participation rate of employees is high. But how are these high participation rates achieved? One way is to involve employees in the course of creating the campaign/events. Pressuring employees into cultural and social activities is not an option, neither in terms of involvement in the events nor by “structural force.” Thus, even the suggestion to involve employees in the development of activities could be understood as a structural force.

The best way to obtain meaningful input is to delegate the decision-making process to the organizational team level for discussion. Management should distribute a reasonable budget to these teams and subsequently hold the teams responsible for formulating their own ideas. The “best” ideas can be identified based on consensus and communicated within the organization. This is a great opportunity not only to generate the best ideas but also to gain insights into the different interests of employees. It also allows an acknowledgment of “all” ideas at a higher level. In the end, the goal is to identify meaningful overall company targets for cultural and social events which best fit the organization’s brand values as well as its people.

Classify Cultural and Social Activities

Given the unique nature of the workforce and individualized cultures of organizations, it is logical that cultural and social activities be designed with their specific audience in mind. In particular, it is recommended that activities take the specific, company-relevant factors of employee satisfaction into account when making and implementing action plans. In cases where employee surveys are yet to be conducted and this information is not available, the following four main factors are suggested as a basis. These factors are present or relevant for all organizations:

Appreciation

Does the activity give participants the feeling of appreciation or being valued? How is that accomplished? Benefits can already be felt by participants when they are drawn into the development and coordination aspects of event implementation. Appreciation is already given to participants when they are involved in the idea-generation phase as their ideas have the potential to be taken up by the company to the point of realization. Appreciation is not only about money but to convey the feeling to others that they are important, unique, and needed.

Who can give this feeling? It is not the HR manager but the boss, starting from the direct leader down the chain of command. The HR manager's responsibility is to ensure that managers fully understand their role and responsibilities in this regard. Appreciation is the single most important factor for employee satisfaction.

It is therefore a must that all cultural and social activities offered by the organization are endorsed, accepted, and welcomed by higher-level managers in the organization. This is the opportunity to show appreciation for the hard work of your employees. The higher management should not take part in the whole activity. It is a special sign of appreciation if the high management comes to welcome the people, but leaves afterwards. This will ensure that the team dynamics remain undisturbed.

Fairness

This factor includes the perception that "I'm paid fairly for my work!" "I can increase my skills!" and "I can learn!" People aim to develop their own personality by attending cultural activities. Thus, the quality of cultural activities that are provided to employees should be high. It should give new inspiration in arts, music, or literature and contribute in a way that it is substantial or meaningful in terms of cultural richness. Cultural and social activities that respect fairness in this regard will create the base for people's social mobility. This focus on high culture is part of lifelong learning which stimulates the sensibility for new ideas, early recognition, open-mindedness, and the feeling of being part of something significant.

As the activities are supposed to contribute to the main purposes and processes of a company, it makes sense to develop cultural as well as social activities that combine the best attributes of such activities. Every cultural activity is a social activity, but not every social activity is a cultural activity. Meeting together in a pub is a social activity, but not necessarily a cultural activity. Visiting an opera and listening to classical music is a cultural and social activity.

The paid activities (monetary rewards) should also be communicated as such to clarify the value of such activities. This will increase the satisfaction with the factor fairness.

Brand

This factor includes the perception that "I'm proud to work for this employer!" As described earlier, cultural and social activities are most successful if embedded in an

internal marketing campaign. It should be discussed if it makes employees proud to meet in a pub for the pleasure of enjoying private small talk or if the admission to sport events or theater performances has a higher impact. Activities and events are not useful if they do not meet interests of the people involved. Additionally, it should be discussed if the activities meet the brand message.

Each cultural or social activity should increase the loyalty to the brand. That is, the brand must be visible somehow – either in the sense of its values or, more tangibly, in terms of product or industry connections – for example, meeting a prominent representative of the company or getting in touch with something representing the brand. It should be a visible expression of the company’s core values.

Team

Team events are often seen as the most obvious opportunity to develop cultural and social activities. They are highly visible, tangible, and easy for employers and employees to reference. They offer the potential for a “big bang” impact and often receive positive word-of-mouth feedback from participants, as special events with colleagues are easy to recall and nearly always positive in nature. While the organization of such activities may seem simple, achieving real impact in terms of increasing employee satisfaction is actually very difficult.

The usual roles of individuals and their working processes are not easily transferred or valid in the field of cultural and social activities. The employees (participants) often have a sense of freedom in being able to show their “private” or non-work behavior. And it is for this very reason that some people dislike cultural and social events because they are uncomfortable with the private behavior of their colleagues, or with the possibility of revealing more about themselves through their own behavior. Although it is difficult to encourage employees to get to know each other in a more private sense, it is crucial that the effort is made in order for trust to be established. This trust forms the basis on which a strong team is built and success is highly unlikely without it.

Team building activities are therefore especially designed with this target in mind. It may even be interesting to apply the term “team building” to such activities with the specific objective of creating a certain amount of social pressure to bring everyone together. The old adage that “nobody likes to play against the team” is a good one in these circumstances. In general of course, all cultural and social activities should be strictly voluntary, but the general headline remains team building.

Guidelines for Developing Cultural and Social Activities

Listen to Needs

Prior to implementing cultural and social activities, listen carefully to the needs of the employees and look at the structure of the employee population. For example, a company with a high number of young, single people might appreciate evening

events, while a company with mostly married people who want to go home to their families in the evening might not.

Cooperate with Employee Committees

Consider letting employees decide, or co-decide, on chosen activities. In countries with institutionalized employee representation, it is highly advisable (if not required by law) to work with such committees on the selection of cultural and social activities.

Find Partners for Corporate Social Responsibility Activities

If you decide to engage in activities related to corporate social responsibility, it is advisable to find partners (i.e., charitable organizations or social departments of governments) who can help you select the projects and design the event. If the activity includes manual work, ensure that enough precaution regarding accident prevention is taken!

Company Events

When designing bigger events for the whole company (like a family day), make sure that the day has something to offer for all age groups like activities for employees who are both single and married, activities for children, activities for physically active employees and for those who are less active, etc.

No Global One Size Fits All

In international companies, be careful to avoid applying cultural and social activities for countries from headquarters somewhere abroad. Allow local teams to come up with their own ideas that best meet the cultural traits of the region and the employees (and their families) that are participating.

No Forced Participation

Do not force people into participating in cultural or social activities. Unless the activity is part of the agenda of an official meeting, keep participation voluntary. Remember that not all people feel equally comfortable in a social setting, or wish to spend time in a work-related environment outside of normal working hours. Avoid also putting any indirect pressure on them to participate.

Risk Perspective

From a risk perspective, cultural and social activities should generally be of low concern to organizations as risks (in terms of damage or negative consequences) are relatively low.

There are, however, some considerations which should be kept in mind in terms of maximizing positive impact and minimizing the chance for any negative impact.

Ingratitude for organized events, for example, is one possible outcome. For this reason, the delegation of the development of cultural and social activities should be

placed in the hands of the most experienced and capable event coordinators in the organization, e.g., the marketing department. The initiator should remain relatively “neutral” and be available as contact or complaint office if something goes wrong.

If it is a social event, groups should be able to share and express both positive and negative feelings and impressions and an open environment should be encouraged. This is not only part of family or partnership building but of team building as well.

There will always be people who like social events more than others, but do not confuse the lonesome ones with those that really disapprove of social events. They are not easily discovered, their attitude is often introverted, and they tend not to favor social events in general, even if they need them. Use the group dynamics to encourage whole teams to act and participate in activities.

It is also important to consider accident and insurance risks, issues around the provision or availability of alcohol, and who should be held responsible for any additional costs, should they arise.

Economic Perspective

Some economists speak about the concept of the “rational human,” or *homo oeconomicus*, a person that follows rational, analytical, value-maximizing, pain-avoiding principles of cost and benefit calculation. But what about sensation seekers, enthusiasts, charity organizers, hedonists, creative developers, and leaders of cost centers? From a psychological point of view, the *homo oeconomicus* is only one half of a human being; the other half is the inner child who does not care for rationality. Marketing, advertising, partner selection, and the perceived value or purchase of many products do not necessarily follow rational reasoning. Why did it become so important that HR departments explain the economic benefits of social and cultural events? These are hygiene factors, like food, clothing, or company toilets and amenities. There might even be economic benefits to having company toilets; but of course, these are not the reasons for having them!

There is an economic benefit to having memorable social and cultural events with and for employees. Employees should not only be seen in the context of “happy cows that produce more milk” – a perspective which sometimes prevails when justifying cultural and social activities within an organization. In general terms, human beings like to show their appreciation by making offerings or giving presents without the condition of better performance from the recipient. Employees should be treated in the same manner. If social and cultural events are really part of the company culture, they should be a real benefit for the employees and should express genuine appreciation on behalf of the management and the company.

By increasing employee satisfaction via company-relevant drivers of satisfaction (appreciation, brand, team, fairness), the company will receive loyal, engaged employees in return. The retention rate will increase and creative ideas and conflicts are dealt with in an enabling and supportive environment. This is especially important for living teams and for the broader well-being of employees in their daily lives.

By developing or supporting cultural and social events, the company has the chance to build a more powerful employer brand which in turn will contribute to the growth and development of the company in the long term.

Cultural and Social Activities: Retention Tools

This section introduces the retention tool “employee relations” that is especially relevant in the field of cultural and social activities. The tool may be used to develop the company’s strategic alignments and action planning in cultural and social activities.

Contents

- (A) What is it?
- (B) Why is it important?
- (C) Activities
 - (a) Events
 - (b) Games
- (D) Responsibilities of HR Manager

What Is It?

Employee relation focuses on communication and cooperation among all employees in order to achieve an efficient team and a positive working environment. It provides suggestions for improving employee relations through special games and events that will strengthen team spirit and improve communication. They can all be easily organized by the HR Manager.

- Target group: All employees.
- Purpose: Retention.
- Business impact: Improve cooperation, communication, overall performance, and team spirit.
- Main responsibility: Organize team activities and events.
- Resources: Minimal preparation time and financial resources.

For an organization to work well, it is crucial that its employees work well together. Good employee relations mean that the employees feel part of the same group (even across functional levels), communicate well with each other, and trust and support each other. They also facilitate the achievement of organizational goals through teamwork and shared targets and are a core element of overall HR development (together with trainings and organizational development).

This tool suggests some simple events and games that can strengthen employee relations at your company. However, if you would like to focus on improving teamwork and performance or if you are facing conflict within a team, you may

need to consider team building activities as a more specific technique within the employee relation measures. Team building usually refers to a more strategic approach to improving the communication and performance of employees. It involves engaging a professional trainer who will work with you to help your teams to grow and develop together, to identify the factors that hinder teamwork, and to develop common agreed goals for the future.

Please note that the ideas in this tool are just some of the ways that you can build stronger employee relations at your company, and you could also consider combining these activities with other, larger-scale team building events.

Why Is It Important?

The main purpose of fostering employee relations is to improve cooperation and communication between employees and to raise overall performance.

Improved employee relations can help to:

- Decrease misunderstandings, communication problems, and conflict.
- Develop a positive working atmosphere where employees enjoy their work and interact in a constructive and positive manner.
- Motivate employees to perform better and to deliver better service to customers.
- Retain employees in the long term.
- Attract better candidates by establishing a reputation for excellence as an employer.

Activities

Events

Group events are a chance for employees to get to know each other in a different, more informal way outside the office. They can help to build trust and to improve communication among employees, which will also have a positive impact on communication and efficiency during working hours.

Excursion

- An excursion is a day out with a specific team/group, or the entire company, to a special destination such as a recreation area or interesting sight.
- It is a good way to gain shared experiences with colleagues in a new and stimulating environment and is a form of recognition for the hard work of all employees.
- In addition to visiting a special sight or organizing a recreation activity, you could also consider having a picnic or a barbeque, including any of the games outlined in this brochure, or inviting additional participants to the activity such as family members.

Dinner

- A dinner is a good way to relax and spend time together with colleagues, with a minimal amount of planning and organization.
- It can be organized at a restaurant or at your company, depending on your preference.
- It is an opportunity for employees to mix within and across their teams (and also with the management).
- You can also consider inviting your employees' spouses or families, including one of the games described in this brochure, combining the dinner with other activities or coordinating an annual dinner for a specific event such as New Year or a Long Service Award ceremony.
- Please organize the dinner well in advance so that it will not interfere with any other plans of your colleagues.

Sporting Activities

- Sporting activities are a relatively simple and inexpensive way to build team spirit and help employees to keep fit and healthy.
- They encourage employees to maintain a balanced life and make a good change from daily routine.
- You could consider organizing either a sports day on a weekend where a range of different sports are available or selecting a day each week where interested employees can meet to participate in their favorite sport on a regular basis.
- If you have enough interested employees, you could also expand the activities to form teams and compete with other departments or companies.

Charity Events

- Charity activities are an opportunity for employees and the company to demonstrate social responsibility for the broader community and the environment.
- They enable employees to work together to make a meaningful contribution to the wider community, while also providing them with a sense of satisfaction.
- Involvement in cultural, environmental, and social activities can also help to publicly express the values of your company and to enhance its brand in the community.
- Should you have employees interested in becoming more active in charity activities, you could also help them to find ways of volunteering as either individuals or groups. Possible activities that do not require too much time or resources include:
 - Visiting old people's homes, welfare hospitals, or disabled-person facilities to volunteer or interact with residents
 - Visiting orphanages, village schools, or children's hospitals
 - Collecting money or goods for special causes such as education support for village schools or disaster relief
 - Collecting money or volunteering for environmental causes such as tree planting or animal protection, especially in areas near your company

Games

In this section a collection of games will be introduced which you can consider to conduct with your employees in order to strengthen the team spirit.

- Games are group activities that do not require much material or money and do not take much time (2 h at the most).
- These games and exercises are especially designed to help people to get to know each other better and work together as a team.
- You can offer these games on a “day out,” at a dinner or company party, or a workshop. You can also organize a special evening or event for employees.
- Do not worry about the implementation: most of the suggested games are very easy to do, they only require enthusiasm and energy, and they will be great fun for employees!

Multi-way Tug-of-War *Description:* Fun, physically challenging activity. Four teams fight for victory, trying to pull the other teams into their direction until the center ring or knot reaches their finish line.

Time: 30–60 min.

Equipment: Pick a soft location (e.g., grass), four thick ropes, steel center ring, connectors (karabiners) for steel ring, and ropes.

Group size: Use for any group size, and ideal group size is 15–30 people, conducted outdoors.

Scope: Fun, strategy and teamwork.

Instructions

1. Prepare the ropes and finish line.
2. Divide the participants into four groups that seem similar in strength.
3. First command from the tug-of-war master is “take the strain.”
4. Second command is “Go!”
5. The goal is for each team to pull the center ring or knot over their finish line. This can rarely be achieved by strength alone and instead will require strategy.
6. Conduct several rounds, e.g., until one team earns three victories and the “tug-of-war title.”

Variations

- In traditional one-on-one tug-of-war, it is mostly strength that wins, with few tactics.
- In multi-way tug-of-war, it is mostly tactics that win, with only some strength.
- Teams can swivel to cooperate/compete with other teams, then switch directions, etc.

Caution

- Nobody should wrap the rope around anyone or anything; participants should only hold it with their hands.
- Watch out for rope burn on hands – let go if the rope is moving through the hands quickly. Ask participants to take watches and hand jewelry off.

Big Knot *Description:* “Big Knot” is a nice warm-up game. Participants work to untie a big knot which has been made with their hands.

Time: 15–30 min.

Equipment: None.

Group size: 6–20 people.

Scope: Fun, problem solving, and strategy.

Instructions

1. Ask all participants to stand in a close circle, so that their shoulders touch each other.
2. Ask them to stretch their hands forward into the circle and to close their eyes.
3. Now everyone should take hold of a hand of somebody else with each of his or her hands, so that he/she holds two hands of other people.
4. Ask participants to open their eyes again and untie the knot they got themselves into – without letting go of the other persons’ hands!

Up on the Chairs *Description:* “Up on the Chairs” is a good “icebreaker” to start a workshop or an event. People are asked to stand on their chairs and must sort by some specified criteria – it takes some balance!

Time: 15–30 min.

Equipment: One chair for each participant.

Group size: 8–20 people.

Scope: Communication and cooperation.

Instructions

1. Make a straight line of strong firm chairs (two chairs less than participants) or ask participants to help you.
2. Ask participants to stand on the chairs.
3. Now ask them to sort according to their height: the tallest should be at the left side of the row of chairs, the smallest at the right end. While sorting, participants should not leave the chairs.

Variations

- Ask your participants to sort by:
 - The size of their shoes
 - Their age
 - The first letter of their name
- Use different criteria as well:
 - Ask them to do any of the sorting without talking, only by using their hands to communicate with each other.

All Aboard! *Description:* This game requires cooperation and communication among all participants. The aim is to make a team fit into a very small area (e.g., a folded blanket).

Time: 30–40 min.

Equipment: Circle of rope or newspaper or blanket or tarp.

Group size: Depending on the size of the platform you choose, there can be just two people or up to 20 people.

Scope: Communication, cooperation, patience, and problem solving.

Instructions

1. Lay out a small area, e.g., with a circle of rope, alternatively you can spread out newspaper, a blanket, or tarp.
2. Ask the whole group to try to fit inside this small area.
3. When the group succeeds, decrease the area (shrink the circle or fold the newspaper or blanket) and challenge the group again.
4. How far can the group go?

Variations

- If your group stands on a tarp or blanket, ask them to turn the tarp or blanket over without anyone touching the ground in the process.
- Name game: The activity can be used as a name game by setting the rule that every communication to another person must include that person's name.
- Add a time limit, e.g., 15 min.

Great Egg Drop *Description:* For the “Great Egg Drop,” you need creativity and group discussion. The aim is to work in teams to build an “egg package” which will protect a raw egg when it is dropped from a height of around 2.5 m.

Time: 30–90 min.

Equipment: Straws, tape, raw eggs, or any other items you can think of!

Group size: 4–100 people.

Scope: Creativity, communication, discussion, and cooperation

Instructions

1. If you have 15 or more people, divide them into teams of four or five people each.
2. Hand a raw egg, 12 straws, and tape to each team (in addition you can give them any other materials you can think of).
3. Ask the teams to construct an “egg package” around the egg out of the material you gave them, so that the egg does not break when you drop it from a height of 2.5 m.
4. Limit the time to 20 or 30 min for each team to build a package.
5. Now ask the teams to demonstrate their packages and drop their egg with the package from a height of 2.5 m – see which team built the safest!

Variations

- Do not give any materials at all to your teams – just the eggs. Ask them to find material themselves (e.g., from the natural environment or the workshop room, depending on where you carry out this exercise).
- Forbid any talking within the team and only allow participants to use their hands for communication.

Survival Scenario Exercise *Description:* This game addresses communication, group discussion, and decision making. The aim is to make a list of items the group feels it needs for its survival after a plane crash. The team has to find a consensus as to which are the ten most important items.

Time: 60–100 min.

Equipment: Paper and pencils.

Group size: Four to ten people.

Scope: Cooperation, discussion and negotiation, decision making, and prioritization.

Instructions

1. Split a larger group into teams of four to ten participants each.
2. Tell your group the following story:

“After your small light aircraft crashes, your group, wearing business/leisure clothing, is stranded on a forested mountain in appalling winter weather (snow covered, subfreezing conditions), anything between 50 and 200 miles from civilization (you are not sure of your whereabouts and radio contact was lost one hour before you crashed, so the search operation has no precise idea of your location either). The plane is about to burst into flames and you have a few moments to gather some items. Aside from the clothes you are wearing, you have no other items. It is possible that you may be within mobile phone signal range, but unlikely. Your (the group’s) aim is to survive as a group until rescued. From the following list, you may choose just ten items that you can take from the plane, after which it and everything inside is destroyed by fire.” (If participants ask further questions, you can think of further facts regarding the circumstances or the environment, or simply leave them unknown.)
3. Now each group has 30 min to discuss and find ten items from the list below that they would take (it is not allowed to split an item or to take only part of it) :
 - Pack of six boxes \times 50 matches
 - Roll of polythene sheeting 3×2 m
 - One crate of beer (12 l in total)
 - One bottle of brandy
 - One crate of bottled spring water (12 l in total)
 - Small toolbox containing hammer, screwdriver set, adjustable wrench, and large penknife
 - Box of distress signal flares
 - Small basic first-aid kit containing plasters, bandages, antiseptic ointment, small pair of scissors, and pain-killer tablets
 - Tri-band mobile phone with infrared port and battery half charged
 - Clockwork transistor radio
 - Gallon container full of fresh water
 - Box of 36×50 g chocolate bars
 - Shovel
 - Short hand-held ax
 - 20 m of 200 kg nylon rope

- Box of 24 × 20 g bags of peanuts
 - Bag of ten mixed daily newspapers
 - Bag of 20 fresh apples
 - Laptop computer with infrared port, modem, and unknown software
 - Inflatable four-person life raft
 - Compass
 - Notebook and pencil
 - Large full aerosol can of insect killer spray
 - Traveling games compendium containing chess, backgammon, and draughts
 - Sewing kit
 - Whistle
 - Torch with a set of spare batteries
 - Box of 50 night-light 6 h candles
 - Bag of six large blankets
4. If you have more than one group, compare the results of the teams and discuss why they would like to take the items, which they chose. If you have only one team, ask them to explain their list to you.

Some ideas for discussion:

- How were decisions made?
- Who influenced the decisions and how?
- How could better decisions have been made?
- How did people feel about the decisions?
- How satisfied was each person with the decision (ask each participant to rate his/her satisfaction out of ten, then obtain a group average, and compare/discuss with other groups' satisfaction levels)?
- What situations at work/home do you think are like this exercise?
- Note: This is a good exercise to demonstrate that group decisions are usually more accurate than individual answers.

Recommendation which items should be taken:

- One crate of bottled spring water (12 l in total)
- Small toolbox containing hammer, screwdriver set, adjustable wrench, and large penknife
- Box of distress signal flares
- Small basic first-aid kit containing plasters, bandages, antiseptic ointment, small pair of scissors, and pain-killer tablets
- Tri-band mobile phone with infrared port and battery half charged
- Box of 24 × 20 g bags of peanuts
- Inflatable four-person life raft
- Compass
- Torch with a set of spare batteries
- Bag of six large blankets

Note:

The above list is a suggestion only and there is no “right answer” to resolving this scenario – your colleagues may think of other solutions or ideas not included here. The purpose of this exercise is to be creative, to understand how group discussions work, and to note that working as a group and using “collective expertise” generally produce better solutions than those developed by individuals.

Mine field *Description:* This game helps to build trust. Participants split into pairs and one of them has the task to guide the other – who is blindfolded – safely across a “minefield” using only words.

Time: 45–90 min.

Equipment: “Mines” (e.g., balls or any other objects such as furniture, cushions) and blindfolds (e.g., shawls, cloth) to cover eyes.

Group size: 2–30 people; works well with larger groups.

Scope: Communication and trust.

Instructions

1. Create a field and lay out some mines (e.g., balls, cushions, or other objects).
The size of the field depends on your group size (3×3 to 8×8 m).
2. Ask participants to get together in pairs.
3. One person is blindfolded (use a shawl or piece of cloth).
4. The other person can see and talk, but cannot enter the field or touch the person.
5. The challenge is for each blindfolded person to walk from one side of the field to the other, avoiding the “mines,” by listening to the verbal instructions of their partners.
6. Allow participants a short period (e.g., 3 min) of planning time to decide on their communication commands.
7. Then begin the activity and ask all pairs to start at the same time – getting from one side of the field to the other.
8. The instructor can float around the game area to help prevent collisions.
9. Consider introducing more items or removing items if it seems too easy or too hard.
10. If someone hits a “mine,” ask them to restart as penalty.
11. Allow participants to swap over and even have several attempts, until a real, satisfied sense of skill and competence in being able to guide a partner through the “minefield” develops.

Variations

- Ask the blindfolded person not to talk.
- Conduct the game as a competitive task (e.g., which pair is the quickest or has the fewest hits).
- Suggest the participants develop a unique communication system (e.g., they can choose funny words like “ice cream” or “traffic light,” or names of colors instead

of “turn left,” “turn right,” “stop,” “go straight on,” etc., so that the commands of one pair do not get mixed up with the commands of another).

If you want, you can discuss any of the following questions:

- How much did you trust your partner (out of ten) at the start?
- How much did you trust your partner (out of ten) at the end?
- What is the difference between going alone and being guided by another person?
- What ingredients are needed when trusting and working with someone else?
- What communication strategies worked best?

Balloon Juggle and Sort *Description:* This game keeps everybody moving and needs cooperation. The challenge is for the whole group to keep as many balloons in the air as possible.

Time: 10–30 min.

Equipment: Three to six balloons per person.

Group size: Any size.

Scope: Fun and cooperation.

Instructions

1. Hand one balloon to each person.
2. Ask everybody to help each other to keep all balloons in the air.
3. Now make it more difficult: Throw in more balloons.

Variations

- Ask the participants to use only one hand or no hands at all to keep the balloons in the air.
- If you have a large group, ask the participants to sort the balloons into colors – but keep them in the air throughout this process.

Catch the Balloon *Description:* This game is good for remembering names. Participants stand in a circle; the person called by his or her name must run into the circle and catch a balloon.

Time: 15–30 min.

Equipment: 10–15 balloons.

Group size: Any size.

Scope: Fun and getting to know each other.

Instructions

1. Ask everybody to stand in a circle.
2. Throw a balloon in the air from your place in the circle – into the middle of the circle – and call the name of a participant.
3. The person must run and catch the balloon before it touches the ground.
4. If he or she catches it, he must throw it into the air and call a name.
5. Adjust the size of the circle if the activity is too easy or difficult.

Variations

- Ask participants not to catch the balloon, but to keep it in the air.
- Throw in more balloons.
- Call two to three names at the same time.

Balloon Dance *Description:* “Balloon Dance” is a fun game which you can play at any party or celebration. Pairs have to dance while balancing a balloon between their foreheads.

Time: 15–30 min.

Equipment: Two balloons per couple and music.

Group size: Any size.

Scope: Fun and coordination.

Instructions

1. The participants should divide into pairs.
2. Each pair gets one balloon.
3. Now they have to dance, balancing the balloon between their foreheads.
4. Each pair that drops their balloon has to drop out.
5. The last pair dancing with the balloon between their foreheads wins.
6. Ask people to find new partners for the second round.
7. Play music for this game if you like!

Variations

- Call a specific word like “cable car,” at which two pairs have to interchange their balloons without dropping them.
- Pass two balloons to each pair, which they have to balance between their foreheads and knees.

Balloon Frenzy *Description:* This game tries to create positive stress for participants. The challenge is to work in groups to keep a number of balloons in the air for as long as possible without “penalties.”

Time: 15–30 min.

Equipment: Five balloons per person and stopwatch.

Group size: Any size.

Scope: Fun and cooperation.

Instructions

1. Hand as many balloons to the group as there are participants.
2. Everyone begins bouncing their balloons in the air.
3. Every 10 s, another balloon is added.
4. See how long the entire group can keep the balloons bouncing before receiving six penalties.
5. A penalty is announced loudly (to create stress) by the leader when a balloon hits the floor, or once on the floor, if it is not back into play within 5 s. (If the group is small, the leader could be part of it, otherwise the leader should serve as observer.)

6. The leader keeps the score for the group by shouting out “one,” “two,” etc. When the leader gets to “six,” time is stopped.
7. After some discussion, the group tries to improve its record with another attempt.

Balloon Finger Balance *Description:* This game helps to focus and concentrate. The challenge is to balance a balloon for as long as possible on the tip of one finger.

Time: 15–30 min.

Equipment: One balloon per person.

Group size: Any size.

Scope: Fun and concentration.

Instructions

1. Ask each participant to balance a balloon on the tip of their index finger. The balloon must not be held, only balanced, and it must not be tapped. The finger must be in direct contact with the balloon at all times.
2. Have a competition to see who can do it for the longest time.

Responsibilities of HR Manager

All activities contained in this tool are easy to organize and can be implemented without too much effort in terms of time or resources. Maintaining a positive working environment and good employee relations can help all managers in other aspects of their work, and the HR Manager has a key role to play in promoting and organizing these activities at the company.

Key responsibilities for the HR Manager are as follows:

- Read through the tool and identify activities or games that especially appeal to you.
- Think of occasions that already exist within your company, where you could implement some of these suggestions – or plan new events.
- Liaise with your management team to implement different activities or events that will improve employee relations at your company.
- Get management and other colleagues involved in promoting and organizing these activities.

Dos and Don'ts

Dos

Strengthen employee relations. Strong communication and cooperation among employees will pave the way to greater team spirit and an efficient and positive working atmosphere. The resources and efforts needed are usually relatively small, but have the potential for a high impact. Through special activities and events, you

will be able to facilitate the strengthening of relationships among your employees and, hopefully, to soon observe genuine improvements in their interactions and attitudes. Excursions, dinners, sporting activities, or games can be organized, depending on the number of employees within the organization.

Discover positive effects of community initiatives. Build a partnership with an organization in your area. You may consider employees' suggestions. One example would be to partner with a kindergarten or nursery preferably where children of employees are accommodated. If you cooperate with a school, you could cater a party for the children of the partner school or organize a joint excursion. Such activities have the potential to improve communication and relationships within the broader community. These links with the community allow the company to demonstrate its commitment to corporate social responsibility and, when events are successful, have a positive impact on company reputation.

Cooperate with employee committees. Consider giving employees the opportunity to decide or co-decide on social and cultural activities. In countries with institutionalized employee representation, it is highly advisable (if not required by law) to work with such committees when selecting social and cultural activities. Furthermore, the co-creation process creates acceptance among employees and motivates them to participate and believe in its purpose.

Avoid one-size-fits-all approach. In international companies, allow local teams to come up with their own ideas that best meet the cultural traits of the region and the employees that are participating, to ensure that events are appropriate for their audience.

Don'ts

Don't expect your employees to sacrifice free time. In the interest of creating a more efficient and positive working atmosphere among employees and to promote productivity and efficiency for the good of the company, cultural and social activities should be understood as an incentive for your employees. Employees should not be asked to sacrifice free time in order to participate; asking them to do so may doom activities or events to failure before they have even commenced.

Don't force people into cultural or social activities. Try to keep participation voluntary. Remember that not all people feel equally comfortable in a social setting or wish to spend time in a work-related environment outside of normal working hours. Avoid also putting any indirect pressure on them to participate.

Don't underestimate the impact of business-partner relationships. Invite business partners to your company to join your team in a special celebration. Such an occasion provides the opportunity to thank both your business partners and employees for their successful cooperation, while fostering positive interaction for the future. Such an event will stimulate the communication among your employees and partners and supports the building of strong relationships. You will cultivate a philosophy of value and appreciation for each other.

Outlook

Despite the changing nature of the workforce – in terms of diversity, geographic dispersion, and the involvement of technology – people remain at the center of everything that an organization does.

The connections between employees and their colleagues, employees and their managers, and employees and their business partners will be critical to the success (or central to the failure) of local and global companies. So long as organizations are run by people and not robots, the importance of building strong relationships and having committed and satisfied employees will remain unchanged.

Cultural and social activities offer companies a relatively “easy” method of connecting with their employees and improving levels of employee satisfaction. Activities which are well organized and executed have the potential to have a significant and positive effect on employee attitudes and behavior.

Cultural and social activities must be shaped on the values of the organization and designed with its specific employees in mind. They need to be dynamic and to offer different and suitable activities for different employees. They must be developed together with the input of employees and they must have the unwavering endorsement and support of management. They must be meaningfully designed in a way that is authentic for participants (so that employees believe activities are not only offered to improve productivity and performance) – and they must be offered consistently and equally to all employees. Although they can be, they need not be expensive or glamorous events involving the investment of significant company resources. Authenticity and appropriateness are far more important.