

## AEC Team-Building in Tough Times

Three ingredients to make it happen.



BY ANNE SCARLETT

**EVERYONE FEELS THE PAIN** of layoffs. *Everyone.* In the earlier rounds, we rationalize by painting a silver lining: “Our firm got rid of fat, and subsequently, operational efficiencies have improved.” That version of layoffs happened in late 2008, and throughout the first half of 2009. But by the third quarter, the AEC layoffs were more painful than ever. Why? Because there was no choice but to dig into the “muscle” of the firm. Lack of work and depleted cash reserves pushed firms to make excruciating choices. This led to the elimination of ultra-talented, loyal, hard-working professionals.

So everyone feels the pain, not just those that were let go. Sometimes, I think those ‘survivors’ are unintentionally neglected. I empathize with their situation. Among other things, I suspect the “survivors” feel a real sense of loss, along with guilt. They face the challenge of preserving their morale; developing their career; and maintaining a sense of belonging and purpose at the firm.

How can your firm hold onto its esprit de corps, investing in your remaining people? And how can your firm rebuild its teams—not just the internal teams, but also those that extend to your clients, consultants, and contractors?

Take a look at the article “Team Building Exercises for Tough Times,” by Pat Olsen (Harvard Business Publishing, <http://ad.vu/rkw5>). The premise: team building is not a luxury. Rather, it’s a *necessity*, especially in tough times. Further, while typical team-building exercises can provide a fun distraction, they are often off-topic from work issues. Some can seem contrived, even campy. It’s a fine balance to ensure that the “fun” activity is legitimate and welcomed by participants. As an alternative, the article proposes team-building exercises that actually exercise the mind—relevant to real-life projects, or around innovations that address industry trends and challenges.

For our AEC community, here’s just one idea building on Olsen’s article: a “what if” discussion group.

Design a brainteaser, or a project scenario, based on the premise of *what if...?* Choose something that is not quantifiable. In other words, something that will require discussion, debate, and collaboration, rather than something that could be researched and proven by referring to Sweet’s catalog, LEED reference documents, or another technical source.

As a communication advocate, I believe facilitating a *what if...?* discussion group serves two key purposes. First, it strengthens team rapport and respect by sharing and building upon one another’s ideas. Additionally, it acknowledges relevant concepts to use in a practical work application. Here are some possible scenarios.

*What if...?* your client has tipped you off that funding will be available for a new wing within the next year? What strategies will you take to secure that work?

*What if...?* your client contact is so stressed out by the possibility of losing his or her job that he or she is not being as responsive as you’d like to stay on schedule?

*What if...?* you, as a team member, are having an ethical issue with one of your subconsultants that was requested or picked by the client?

The *what ifs* are endless. The senior professionals in the firm surely can dig into their own memory banks to recall challenging situations that would serve as perfect *what ifs* for this discussion group.

### It Starts at the Top

To ensure lasting results, owners/partners need to endorse—and be involved in—team-building efforts, either as the primary facilitators, or as active participants during facilitation. Without you, any team-building results will be diminished. Owners can collaborate with human resources, the marketing team, or even an outside consultant. But you must express open support for the process. Don’t just assign this to someone, and then stand back to see what happens.

Incidentally, leadership behaviors are demonstrated at virtually every level of the firm. Team building is a perfect time to let leaders at all levels emerge and shine!

But what about when leaders have trouble keeping their *own* spirits up in these tough times? You’re privy to the numbers, and you know the firm’s outlook—the good, the bad, and the ugly. I’ve been there; I know that feeling.

One idea: how about monitoring your own attitude to fuel positive team building virtually every day? I am not suggesting that you lie, or be anything less than transparent regarding what is going on in the company. What I am suggesting is that

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you buck up and keep spirits high because people are counting on you to do so. It starts at the “top,” even if the “top” is a senior project manager leading a team within a specific business unit.

Perhaps you find an inspirational role model to keep your mood elevated. Maybe your role model is outside of the industry. Maybe your inspiration is a community figure, a sports coach, or a philanthropic guru. Learn from their behavior. One of my inspirations is a well-known salsa instructor in Chicago. Here’s what watching him teach diverse groups of students has taught me to tap into:

- **Higher energy:** but keep it tame enough to project sincerity.
- **Compassion:** give the loner in the group gentle kindness, without drawing attention to potential deficiencies.
- **Universal humor:** good-natured, not biting or sarcastic.
- **Movement and activity:** by encouraging this, the salsa instruction involves bioenergetics, which also is worth consideration as part of a business meeting.
- **Genuine concern:** for all participants.

Leaders with a good attitude naturally help to build a stronger team. And for those of you leaders who are at the top of the top: no infighting and backstabbing allowed! That behavior is far more visible than you realize, especially to your middle managers. If your firm’s leadership team is dysfunctional, then you can be certain it will squelch positive inroads you’ve made throughout the firm with team building.

### Peer-to-Peer Teamwork

In addition to leadership endorsement and participation, team building also is solidified with peer-to-peer methods—connecting your internal teams with one another. Traditionally, we attempt to strengthen our teams on a “micro” level, with the folks that work directly with one another day-to-day. But for big and small firms alike, there’s also the “macro” version of team—the entire firm. What do firms do to make sure that their teams jive with one another, for the greater good of the firm’s mission and vision?

My favorite solution intertwining teams across the board, and creating empathy along with a unified all-for-one attitude, is a technique that Providence, R.I.-based Gilbane, Inc. employs. Several years ago, I provided on-site consulting to Gilbane’s Chicago office for three months. At that time, I

discovered that the firm offers the amazing Gilbane University, where continuing education is strongly encouraged for every professional. This is not uncommon for larger companies, yet Gilbane’s is one of the best programs that I have witnessed to date in the AEC industry. By the way, their classes also are offered to the firm’s clients and subcontractors. Talk about sticking power with their external relationships!

But there’s more. Gilbane also has a process by which they create empathy, respect, and a keen familiarity between departments. When new professionals are hired at any level—field superintendent, project manager, etc.—their training process involves “living” within the various core departments of the firm before commencing with their “actual” positions. For example, a woman named Julie helped the marketing department full time for a two-week period during my consulting engagement.

Incidentally, my role was a unique one. I was responsible for guiding/coaching two brand new marketing coordinators during the senior marketing director’s maternity leave. A company that wanted to ensure proper orientation and career development for their marketing staff decided to hire an outside consultant rather than just “make do”—that’s impressive!

During her time in our department, Julie helped with all things marketing—from assembling proposals, to manning a table at an industry conference, to preparing graphics and copy for direct mail and presentation pieces. Yes, it was just two-weeks, but that equals 10 business days worth of connection, empathy, and relationship-building than she wouldn’t have had otherwise. Julie also spent two weeks each in accounting, human resources, and information technology.

Why not consider something similar—perhaps on a smaller scale, but don’t reduce it down to something meaningless—in your own firm? Even if you are a small boutique of just 20 people, there’s no reason why you can’t have technical folks shadow core back-of-house roles and vice versa. It’s good stuff, and it will indeed serve as a productive team-building tool.

Don’t neglect your remaining staff during tough times. Team building is essential, and it can be reached with three ingredients: 1. Identifying productive, practical team-building alternatives; 2. Leadership endorsement, involvement and leadership-by-example; 3. A built-in team-building process from peer to peer. MSC