

Much as the boundaries of art are continually being pushed by new and innovative works, corporate teambuilding is always being redefined by a diverse variety of activities. Nearly any non-business activity where meeting attendees work together toward a common goal can be considered teambuilding. It's even difficult to rule out some events as passé: Major corporations are still using ropes courses and building racecars out of odds and ends. So planners have to consider such traditional teambuilding options for their groups, along with the more avant-garde ones.

Certainly, one of the most avant-garde teambuilding outfits to surface in recent years is World Class Teams, of Cardiff, CA, near San Diego. The firm is headed by founder, owner, and self-proclaimed "director of fun," Robyn Benincasa. A champion adventure racer, triathlete, diver, and martial artist, Benincasa is also a full-time firefighter for the City of San Diego.

### 'Adventure Racing' As A Model

Benincasa's firm custom-tailors teambuilding programs for corporations, all modeled on adventure racing. In this sport, teams of four people negotiate a treacherous course through the world's most inhospitable environments for distances up to 500 miles. Racers go with little food, sleep only when they dare, and navigate with a map and compass through 20 to 30 checkpoints, doing whatever it takes to get to the finish line together — the ultimate in interdependence and true teamwork.

Of course, the events Benincasa organizes for corporations are far less physically intense and time-consuming,

but they all are set up to stress to the participants that such factors as clear communication, dynamic role shifting, and the ability to leave one's ego at the starting line are vital to any team's success in achieving a shared goal. As such, they appear to make a decidedly strong impact on those involved.

"Participating in Robyn's program was truly a profound — indeed, life-changing — experience for me," says Amy Peterson, director of sales for the Madison, WI-based Credit Union National Association. Along with about 50 other managers from vari-



**"When we're doing things and busy at work, we're always on the fast track ... but nature has a more slow-to-medium rhythm that allows you to create."**

— Gail Larsen, Founder, Real Speaking, Santa Fe, NM

ous corporations and businesses, Peterson participated in a Benincasa-organized "Extreme Team" teambuilding program, a multiple-day event held last summer in San Diego. What Peterson remembers most was an activity in which the group was broken up into teams that then had to swim out as a group into the ocean to certain designated points far from shore.

"I'm not a strong swimmer and really didn't have to participate, but my teammates all encouraged me and assisted me while I was in the water," says Peterson. "It really helped stretch my comfort zone." Peterson says she was so impressed by her teambuilding ex-

perience that she spent the entire four-hour flight back home animatedly discussing the event with the passenger next to her.

"I am still charged by my experience participating in Robyn's adventure-based teambuilding program, and have put a lot of her team ideas into practice in my business," says Scott McGarrigle, CEO, Applied Knowledge, Inc., Santa Ana, CA, who took part in the same event as Peterson.

Other participants in this event who were contacted for this article share Peterson's and McGarrigle's enthusiastic attitude. Typical

erly Hills, CA, at 310-273-8807, or by contacting World Class Teams direct at 619-368-0600.

### Teambuilding: Always Popular

Regardless of its latest trendy new advances, the one aspect that remains stable in the world of teambuilding is the strong need for it, despite the current economic downturn and reduced spending on meetings and incentives.

more Resort & Spa; part of the event was a racecar-building competition arranged by Merestone Productions, Scottsdale, AZ.

The value of teambuilding can be manifold: fostering unity and organization, developing critical thinking skills, providing education about the company or other topics of interest, and supplying just plain fun. And most planners generally agree that its value, however defined, justifies the expense. In particular, if the end result is that members of a corporate group return to the workplace with a better understanding of each other and an increased ability to in-

teract, a company can be assured the program expense will translate to higher productivity and profit.

to have the whole team in one place in such scenarios. When the team is together for a face-to-face meeting, it is important to take advantage of that time to practice teambuilding through events such as a ropes course or smaller-scale icebreakers.

But how are teambuilding skills actually to be effectively developed, and what sort of teambuilding is right for your group? Some of the main reasons to engage in teambuilding are to break the ice between geographically-alienated employees, and to make new employees feel like part of the team. So you will have to settle on some general approach first. For example, do you want a common activity that everyone can relate to, a physically rigorous outdoor adventure, or something that will get everyone's creative juices flowing?

*Meetings are a rare opportunity to bring a company's often far-flung key players together. An excellent*

*way to exploit this is by involving them in a teambuilding exercise to help quickly break the ice.*

Ernie Kelsey, manager of service marketing for American Honda Motor Company, Torrance, CA, plans the company's national sales meetings, and has used Cookin' Up Change, LLC, Santa Fe, NM, quite often for his firm's teambuilding activities. His most recent group's demographics were "heavily skewed male" — but nevertheless he found they all could

relate and take an interest in cooking (and eating). The event itself took place at the Santa Fe School of Cooking, Santa Fe, NM. There, the 35 attendees were split into groups and assigned to cook different meals with the aid of a chef. Cookin' Up Change found ways to make the event challenging. First, the event began with a scavenger hunt through Santa Fe: The group had to search for ingredients they would need as well as play money they would use to pay the chef.

Kelsey points out some other challenges: "I was personally working on a flûn, which was a very complicated recipe, and then they made us switch and I was working on Chili Colorado. So you had to transfer knowledge within the teams, like where you were in the recipe, and how long it had to cook. Also there weren't enough utensils, so you had to share your resources with everyone."

*Participants always have a good time at any of Robyn Benincasa's often highly physical teambuilding events.*



As Al Maag, chief communication officer and meeting planner for the past 30 years for Avnet, Phoenix, AZ, explains, "When things are tough there has to be a balance. You've got to watch where you have your meetings. You better have a good ROI on it at any time, but in my opinion you must continue training and making sure everybody communicates well as to what the vision and direction of the company is."

Maag tries to incorporate teambuilding into most of his meetings. "We in the technology field like everybody else have felt some very difficult pains of business — so we did not want to invest in a big event," he explains.

"For this event we invited 85 key individuals who have an effect on our P&L," says Maag. The individuals attended a meeting at the Arizona Bilt-

teract, a company can be assured the program expense will translate to higher productivity and profit.

### Getting The Key Players Together

Meetings are always a special opportunity to bring many of a company's most important players together, an opportunity that should always be exploited to maximum advantage. And that means including teambuilding, as Reena Singhal, component design engineer and meeting planner with Intel Corporation, Texas Development Center, Austin, TX, stresses.

"As projects become more intricate," says Singhal, "it is not always possible