

Museums a Popular Place to Boost Morale Amid Monets

New training programs at a number of museums nationwide tap their collections and creative environments for the benefit of corporate clients. They are the latest twist in team-building programs, which can encourage creativity, foster respect and uncover potential team-member contributions.

By Jennifer J. Salopek

Small groups of adults, clad in jeans and wearing name tags, race through the halls of a huge, light-filled building. They zoom past a full-size stage mockup of Sesame Street, careen around the Berenstain Bears, hop through a few bars of “Dance Dance Revolution,” then don capes and leap into the world of American comic book heroes. Fun? Yes. Frivolous? No way.

This is a corporate team-building exercise at the National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. The participants are members of work teams who have come to the museum to hone their collaboration skills. Their task—to find clues scattered throughout the museum—is an exercise specifically designed to highlight the characteristics of high-performing teams. Afterward, they’ll participate in a debriefing session and leave the museum with goals and an action plan.

Not a typical museum trip, perhaps. But a growing trend. New training programs at a number of museums nationwide tap their collections and creative environments for the benefit of corporate clients. They are the latest twist in team-building programs, which can encourage creativity, foster respect and uncover potential team-member contributions.

Kathryn Bartol, a professor of management and organization at the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, says that such programs can be great

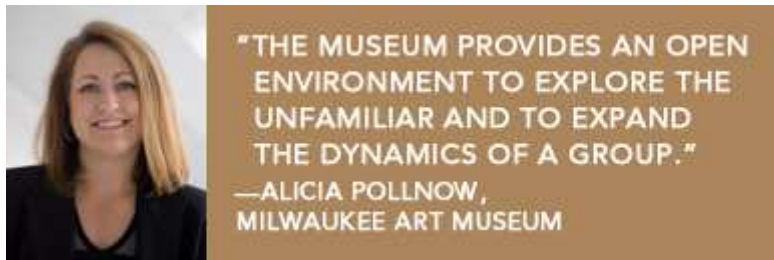


for teams whose work is interdependent and can encourage risk-taking. “Interpersonal relationships are strengthened in an environment where mistakes don’t count, and divergent thinking is good for creativity,” she says.

Fortunately, there are lots of options. The Milwaukee Art Museum recently launched three new offerings for corporate clients that vary in duration and complexity. From a short art break as a breather from a long business meeting to a team creation project that lasts an hour or two, the museum’s exhibits and educators aim to inspire fresh thinking.

“The museum provides an open environment to explore the unfamiliar and to expand the dynamics of a group,” says Alicia Pollnow, corporate sales manager at the museum.

In one exercise, team members work collaboratively to copy a work of art from the collection. The end result, Pollnow says, makes it difficult to identify individual contributions. “At its conclusion, our educator facilitates a dialogue about the experience and how participants can translate the learnings to their work lives.”



Mark Sabljak, publisher of the *Business Journal* in Milwaukee, took his leadership team. “Lying on the floor with crayons and clipboards is not something we would have done on our own,” he says. “When we passed around our work, we found that we could all look at the same picture, but see very different things.

“We went back to the office understanding that we each have a different perspective to fit into a business plan; it was a very powerful moment.”

Career Development Services, a not-for-profit training consultancy in Rochester, New York, began working with Rochester’s National Museum of Play about 18 months ago to design a program in direct response to corporate requests.

“Our clients wanted a greater element of fun, but fun with a purpose,” says Sharon Melville, director of business services at Career Development Services.

Once participants find Melville’s clues scattered throughout the museum, they participate in guided discussions.

“Research has shown that, the more team members know about one another, the better they work together,” Melville says. For example, once they discover a painting of kids playing a board game, participants discuss their favorite games when they were children.

Amy Friend, manager of technical communication and localization at healthcare technology firm Carestream Health Inc. in Rochester, is a recent client. “All of us got to see our co-workers in a different light,” Friend says. “The activities were very revealing of people’s work tendencies.”

Friend took her team after her division was spun off from the medical imaging division at Eastman Kodak Co. She found that the program eased the transition.

“As we were moving away from Kodak and trying to find our own identity, it struck me that we really need each person on our team to feel like a leader,” she says.

Corporate budgets are tight right now, and everyone is keeping a close eye on return on investment. But the tough times may be fostering experimentation with museum-based training.

The demands of the difficult economy drove the marketing team at Toronto-based financial services firm B2B Trust to a program at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The program, developed by consulting firm Conundrum Adventures Inc., centered on a puzzle the team had to solve as it moved through the museum’s collections.

“In this economic climate, we are all trying to do more with less,” says Rhonda Hogan, senior manager of corporate marketing at B2B Trust. “We have a lot of meetings and a lot of hard deadlines. We needed something fun to do as a group that would allow us to learn along the way.”

The Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland also is moving into the realm of display cases, dioramas and docents. The college’s Office of Executive Programs is launching a team-building program next spring that will be conducted on-site in the museum and on the battlefield at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

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