

A survey of the prevalence and nature of teambuilding interventions in South African organisations*

H.S. Kriek**

Graduate School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa
PO Box 392, Midrand 1682, Republic of South Africa
kriekhas@unisa.ac.za

Received August 2007

South African organisations follow international trends and also increasingly make use of teams and teambuilding. However, no study can be found on the prevalence and nature teambuilding interventions used by South African organizations. As an explorative study the current research uses a survey to study the existing scenario regarding the application of teambuilding in local organizations. It reports on the prevalence, nature, type and purpose of teambuilding interventions used. It is found that the use of teambuilding is widespread and confirms perceptions that most organizations make use thereof. The study also raises issues that would warrant further research, like the real or perceived **success** of teambuilding; reasons to why it is so prevalent and why particular types are preferred and the need to bridge the gap between academia and practice through research focusing on the local and therefore “African” context.

**An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Eastern Academy of Management International Conference in Amsterdam, Netherlands, in July 2007.*

***To whom all correspondence should be addressed.*

Introduction

It can be said that the use of teams is one of the most prominent trends of modern organisational life (Thompson, 2004; Hackman, 2003; Frost, 2001; Kreitner & Kinicki, 2001; Fisher, 2000: xxi) and indeed teams ‘are becoming very big business’ (Offerman & Spiros, 2001: 376). When the South African organisational context is perused it would seem that organisations follow international trends and also increasingly make use of teams (Kriek, 2003; Stander, 2003; Bennett & Minty, 2001; Grutter & Faul, 1998; Veldsman, 1995). Concurrent with this trend the use of *teambuilding* as part of growing and developing teams is a common practice (French & Bell, 1995). In this regard Buller and Bell (1986:305) remarks: ‘One of the most popular intervention techniques in organisation development (OD) is teambuilding.’ Indeed it has been found that it is the intervention used most frequently in planned changed efforts (Offerman & Spiros, 2001; Covin & Kilmann, 1991). In the South African context Cilliers (2000: 26) observes ‘Nowadays almost all large and many smaller organisations invest energy in teambuilding.’

It would furthermore seem that teambuilding had become specialised with different types of teambuilding available to organizations (Brawley & Paskevich, 1997: 16-17). Cilliers (2000:18) identifies what he calls a functionalistic-, humanistic- and a psychodynamic approach while Levi (2001: 311-314) distinguishes goal setting-, role definition-, interpersonal process skills-, cohesion building- and problem solving types. Hayes (1997: 61) states that ‘Most, if not all, methods of team-building derive from one of ... four

approaches’ namely the interpersonal approach, focus on roles and norms, a values approach or emphasis on the team’s tasks. Beer (1980) also identifies four approaches, namely interpersonal processes, goal-setting, role definition and problem-solving. Local research suggests different types of teambuilding are also used in the South African context. In this regard assessment is used to ascertain roles (Stander, 2004) and personality (Gmeiner & Van Wyk, 2001); Kriek (2003) and Heunis (1997) describe adventure approaches while Cilliers (2000) uses a psychodynamic approach as teambuilding intervention. Thus, a variety of approaches are used in local organisations. Yet, no research of the South African organizational landscape could be found to substantiate the claim of the widespread use thereof in local companies as suggested by Cilliers (2000) and no research is available to indicate the prevalence and nature of teambuilding interventions in South African organizations.

Purpose and research objectives

The study of teambuilding and particularly the success thereof is a contentious issue in research and certainly no clear answers have emerged. Some proclaim success, others point to the lack of success thereof while some indicate that the results are inconclusive. The lack of conclusive results could be attributed to a number of factors including difficulty in comparisons across settings and types (Offerman & Spiros, 2001: 376); experimental rigor not satisfactorily (Hardy & Crace, 1997: 6; De Meuse & Liebowitz, 1981: 373) and a need for new measures of team performance (Dunphy & Bryant, 1996: 697). However, if the practice is widespread (Yukelson, 1997: 73) and since

businesses 'are spending millions of dollars each year' on Organisation Development practices (including teambuilding) (Williams, Graham & Baker, 2003: 45) it would seem that research is needed on the current state of teambuilding practice. At the very least ascertaining what is happening in practice and to what extent business are utilizing these interventions would improve the link between science and practice. As aptly stated by Offerman and Spiros (2001: 376) 'Doing better at integrating the science and practice of team development requires a clear understanding of what occurs in practice... and how science could better serve practice.' While this could be true of the science of Organisation Development in general, it is particularly important for the South African research environment given the lack of research in teambuilding specifically. Thus, a more fundamental problem to those of the success and costs of teambuilding interventions would be to ascertain whether the use thereof is indeed as pervasive as claimed and if so, what the types of interventions being used are. A better understanding of what occurs in practice would assist researchers to ascertain how science could better serve practice- especially in researching the success and effectiveness of the practice. Thus, for science to study and provide relevant and applicable knowledge production and dissemination on teambuilding and the effectiveness thereof it first has to establish the prevalence of the use of teambuilding and to understand the nature of the types of teambuilding used in local organizations. The problem seems to be particularly pressing as it does not seem to raise the interest of local researchers (no local research could be found on the topic). It is therefore, the aim of this research to ascertain the prevalence and nature teambuilding interventions used by South African organizations.

It is critical for this study to indicate how both 'team' and 'teambuilding' is defined. The definition provided by Cohen and Bailey (1997: 241) is preferred as definition of 'team', namely: 'A team is a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems (for example, business unit or the corporation), and who manage their relationships across organizational boundaries.' It adequately succeeds in defining the key characteristics of organizational teams in that it indicates that it is about real, intact groups, perform interdependent tasks and operate within a social system (Hackman & Wageman, 2005: 272).

Teambuilding can be defined as 'interventions designed to improve their effectiveness in working together by confronting and resolving problems' (Boss, 1983: 66). This improvement could be the 'productive output' 'social processes', 'well-being of individual team members' (Hackman & Wageman, 2005: 272) and 'organizational alignment' (Thompson, 2004: 36). This study uses as definition of teambuilding that it is '...a specific intervention to address issues relating to the development of the team. Typically it consists of a one (or more) day programme focused on improvement of interpersonal relations, improved productivity or better alignment with organisational goals. Examples include emphasis on fun and

enjoyment (e.g. paintball, river raft), simulation of workplace dynamics (e.g. ropes courses), assessment (e.g. personality type or roles assessments) or problem solving activities (in- or outdoor experiential games).'

Research design and methodology

Babbie and Mouton (2001:79) state that social research has three basic purposes, namely exploration, description or explanation. Any research can have more than one of these purposes or a combination thereof. The current study is explorative as it explores teambuilding intervention to provide a basic familiarity with the topic. To this effect the study uses a survey as research design. As Page and Meyer (2000:114) suggest this design enables the researcher to study the population sample in order to infer characteristics of a population. The current study made use of a self-administered survey (Cooper & Schindler, 1998: 304). In this study the existing scenario regarding the application of teambuilding in local organisations is surveyed.

Sample

A convenient sample was used by sampling first year MBL¹ students at the Graduate School of Business Leadership of the University of South Africa. A total number of 349 South African respondents were used in the study (N = 349). Of the respondents 70,3 percent are male and 29,7 percent female. They reported the following levels occupied in their organisation: Top management (15, 3%), Middle to senior (71, 6%), Middle (8, 1%) and Supervisory (4, 8%). The Graduate School of Business Leadership requires a minimum of three years work experience before admittance to the programme. The average length of employment was reported as 4, 4 years.

Procedure

The MBL first year students meet at the start of their studies for a study school where they take a class in Group Dynamics. Four separate classes were presented by the current researcher after which each of the groups was given the same survey questionnaire to complete. The study benefited from the class situation where questionnaires were handed out to each participant and collected in person. The researcher explained the definition of 'teambuilding interventions' that is used as well as what is required by the participants in order to remove disadvantages due to communication errors (Cooper & Schindler, 1998). Results were analysed by using Excel spreadsheets, standard Excel functions and SSPS. Results are presented here in graphical form using pie- and bar charts.

The following questions were used in this study:

1. When last did your work team participate in teambuilding?

¹The Master of Business Leadership (MBL) is the equivalent of an MBA and is offered by the Graduate School of Business Leadership of the University of South Africa.

2. Who participated in the teambuilding intervention?
3. What was the duration of the teambuilding intervention?
4. Were any assessment tools applied?
5. In your opinion, what describes the nature of the assessment best i.e. personality assessment (e.g. MBTI), climate or culture assessment, team roles assessment (e.g. Belbin) or other.
6. Did the team building intervention take place indoors, outdoors or a combination?
7. Did you make use of any of the following activities indoor problem-solving activities, outdoor problem-solving activities: low ropes course, high ropes course, 4x4 drives, river rafting, abseiling, driving, paint ball, other.
8. Which of the following reasons best describes the purpose of the teambuilding intervention? Was it done to resolve conflict, build a new team, align the team with a change programme, increase productivity, increase motivation, improve interpersonal relationships, and find direction for team or any other?

Results

Elapsed time since last participation

The notion that teambuilding is a widespread practice in South African organisations is confirmed by the research. Participants report that only 6,9 percent had never participated in teambuilding before. Those reporting participation in teambuilding interventions indicated that 40,1 percent participated within the past six months while 17,8 percent said they participated between six months and a year ago. Nearly nineteen percent (19,1 percent) indicated participation between one and two years ago with sixteen percent (16%) indicating that they last participated more than two years ago.

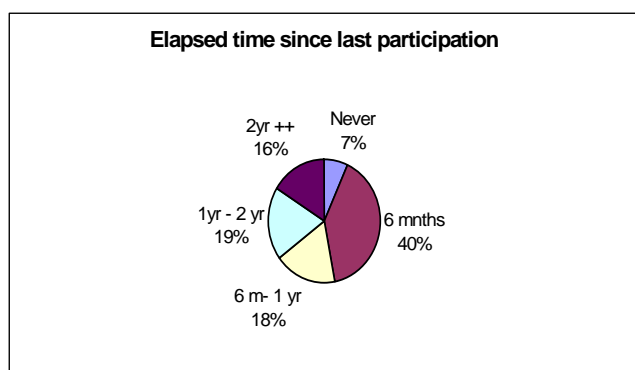


Figure 1: Elapsed time since last participation in teambuilding

Nature of team involved in intervention

It would seem from the study that the functional work team is the system used most often. Forty four percent of interviewees indicated that the teambuilding occurred with their immediate colleagues. Twenty-eight indicated that mixed groups within the organisation were used with members from other departments joining in the intervention. Mixed teams that consisted of participants' organisations as well as other teams accounted for 4,5 percent of the time while in 9,3 percent of teams, the whole organisation took part.

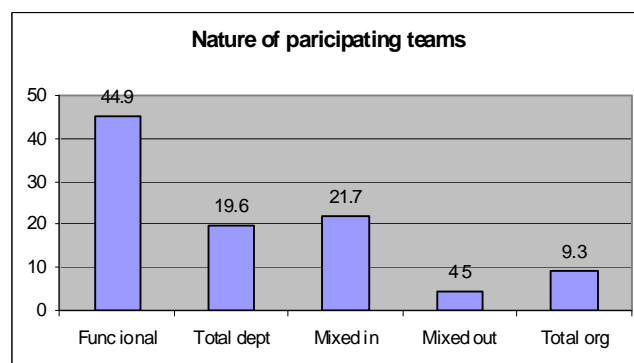


Figure 2: Nature of team

Duration of intervention

Most respondents had been involved in interventions that lasted one day (thirty percent) with 29, 3 percent reporting that it had been done in less than a day. If one adds that twelve five percent of the sample reported that they had been involved for two days, it means that seventy two percent or nearly three-quarter of the respondents had completed the intervention in two days or less.

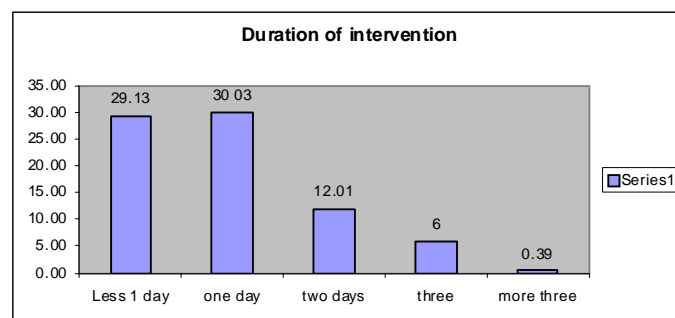


Figure 3: Duration of intervention

Assessment

In thirty-three percent of the cases some form of assessment had been used as part of the teambuilding intervention. The assessments had been done before the intervention in twenty-six percent of cases, during the teambuilding in forty percent and after the completion of the event in thirty four percent of the cases. It would seem that the most popular type of instrument had been assessment of roles operative in the team. In forty one percent of the cases the various roles in the team had been measured. Personality assessments had been used in thirty percent of the cases and twenty six percent is reported for climate assessments.

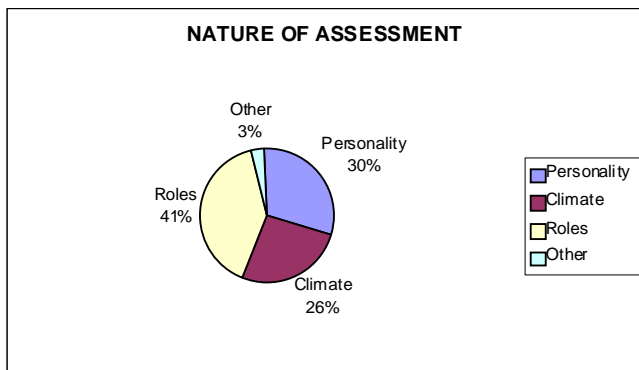


Figure 4: Nature of assessment

Type of activity used

A combination of indoor and outdoor activities is used most often with forty three percent of respondents reporting that this type of location was used. In thirty three percent of the cases indoor activities were used while outdoor activities were used in twenty four percent of the cases. The outdoor activities were distributed among a number of different types thereof and include low ropes course (26 percent), high ropes course (24 percent), 4X4 drives (21 percent), river rafting (24 percent), abseiling (21 percent), driving (6 percent) and paint ball (11 percent). In twenty four percent of the cases activities that were not included in the questionnaire were used and they include drumming, hiking and orienteering.

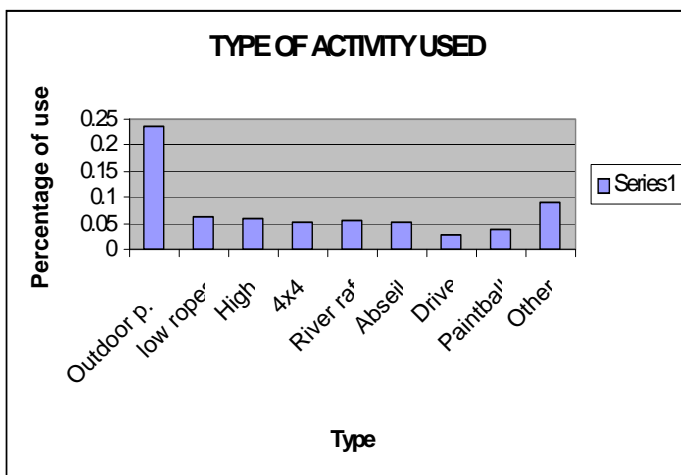


Figure 5: Type of activity used

Reasons for intervention

The survey indicates that the reasons for utilizing the interventions are manifold. The reason most often reported as motivation for teambuilding was to improve interpersonal relationships (24 percent). This was followed by efforts to increase the motivation of the team (19 percent) and to align the team with a change programme (14 percent). Other reasons given as rationale for the interventions include to resolve conflict (6 percent), build a new team (12 percent), increase productivity (14 percent) and to find direction for the team (10 percent). This is indicated in Figure 6 below.

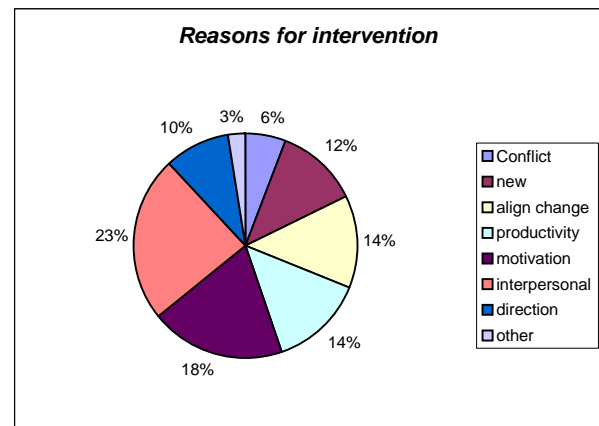


Figure 6: Reasons for intervention

Discussion

It is a limitation of the study that it surveyed a sample of graduate students and also a majority of middle to senior management. It does, however, allow for some insights into the practice of teambuilding to become apparent. Amongst these the following became evident:

- It can indeed be said that the use of teams is one of the most prominent trends of modern organisational life (Thompson, 2004; Hackman, 2003; Frost, 2001; Kreitner & Kinicki, 2001; Robbins & Finley, 2000; Fisher, 2000: xxi). It seems that South African organizations also make extensive use of teambuilding to assist in managing this phenomenon. As international samples indicate (Offerman & Spiros, 2001; Covin & Kilmann, 1991) the use of teambuilding is widespread and it would seem in the South African context the same trend is followed.
- From the survey it would seem that the major use of teambuilding is to improve the functional work team. Although the current study did not include reasons for this phenomenon it could be that current trends influence the need to 'build teams', like the need to:
 - optimize diversity as competitive advantage (Robbins, 2003:15);
 - cope a world of work with increased pace of change (Hayes, 1997; Stott & Walker, 1995);
 - amplify the importance of human capital (e.g. knowledge, creativity and expertise) (Robbins, 2003:14); and
 - utilize the benefit of teams as they outperform individual effort (Stander, 2003; Thompson, 2004; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Thus, it would seem that Robbins *et al.* (2003:568) are correct in their assessment that 'organizations are increasingly relying on teams to accomplish work tasks' and in South African teams it is the functional work team that is used to this end.

- It seems the South African sample contradicts the American trend where improved group performance (the more task-focus versus people-centered focus) is the 'most common primary goal of interventions' (Offerman & Spiros, 2001: 387). South African interventions seem to focus more on interpersonal relations than organizational outcomes with a majority of participants reporting that improvement of interpersonal relationships was the main aim of the interventions.
- It seems from the study that South African organizations also make extensive use of outdoor experiential training. This seems to be on par with international practice with the use thereof indicating 'rapid growth' (Mazany, *et al.*, 1997: 103) and 'businesses spending hundreds of millions of dollars each year on outdoor experiential training' (Williams, *et al.*, 2002: 45). It is, however, as critical for South African companies to heed the following warning: 'as more and more organizations begin to send participants to such outdoor workshops, there is a need that that grows parallel to their popularity – the need to ensure that activities are effective, and have measurable positive outcomes that relate to denied objectives' (Mazany, *et al.*, 1997: 111).
- It would seem from the survey that South African teambuilding practice indicates preference to the use of team role instruments of assessment (41% of those reporting the use of assessment indicated that team role instruments were used). This differs distinctly from American practitioners where a majority of 55% indicated that the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) alone was preferred (Offerman & Spiros, 2002: 384). Even though the MBTI is the 'most commonly used instrument used in team development practice' one has to make room for the use of other personality assessment instruments as well (e.g. FIRO-B). Thus, the difference in preference between South African practitioners and those of their American counterparts would be more pronounced. It certainly leaves opportunity for exploration as to why this is preferred by South African teams.
- The reasons why it is so prevalent and why particular types are preferred. The South African history with Apartheid and racial tension as well as the advent of the new, democratic dispensation could influence efforts of organisations to use teambuilding to bridge prejudices and misconceptions along the racial divide in the country. It could also be that organisations make use of teams and teambuilding because it aligns with the African philosophical concept of 'Ubuntu'. Ubuntu is based on the principle that 'I am because we are' (Mbigi, 2000:6) and emphasizes interpersonal relationships. However, although these could be possible reasons for its application, it should be put to research scrutiny.
- The need to bridge the gap between academia and practice through research focusing on the local and therefore 'African' context became evident. Studies to ascertain shared best practice and to find ways to disseminate these findings seem imperative.

This study opens up opportunity to understand what is happening in the world of teambuilding and points to the need of closer relationships between researchers and practitioners. It furthermore suggests that the gap between the pervasive practice and variety of types of intervention employed point to the need of increased research focus on the subject. Outcomes of these in future will hopefully assist organizations on best practice and guide team leaders in utilizing the practice for effectively.

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Conclusion

From the study a picture emerges of the use of teambuilding and the nature thereof in South African organisations. It seems Cilliers (2000:26) is correct in his assertion that it is a widely used phenomenon. The study, however, raises a number of issues that would warrant further research. Amongst these are:

- Studies into the real or perceived **success** of teambuilding. Although information regarding the use and nature of teambuilding transpired, it only provides a basis from where the critical issue regarding the benefits thereof for organizations should be explored.

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