

Improving Staff Morale? It can be Child's Play

By Lorraine Mirabella | Sunday, March 21, 2010

With widespread layoffs, pay cuts and heavier loads, many employees are finding work has been a real bummer.

Pump It Up, the indoor playground franchise, has a solution: The moon bounce.

Parents of the preschool-and-up set know the "inflatable party zone" as a venue for birthday parties. But the Elkridge location this month began offering a new twist-corporate "team-building" event during which adults can leave their ties and cubicles behind and tumble their way over gigantic obstacle courses and inflatable slides.

TEKsystems, a Hanover-based provider of information-technology staffing; Cort Furniture's sales and marketing workers; and employees of Howard County's Department of Recreation and Parks have all tried it out.

These economic times might be the sweet spot for companies offering venues for grown-up workers who have survived layoffs and endured unpaid furloughs to blow off steam. As the economy recovers, they anticipate that more employers can afford to bring some much-needed fun back to the workplace.

Some employers, betting that improved morale will translate into greater sales and profits, are giving workers on-the-job time to bond through organized competitions far removed from the office. In the Baltimore region, Dave & Buster's, the restaurant and arcade, has seen some renewed interest, and the laser-tag arena XP Laser Sport made a push to lure corporate clients when it opened a new location last year.

"It's a break for us," said Lucy Rermgosakul, who sat on a TEKsystems employee committee charged with planning an outing of more than two-dozen employees to Pump It Up on Friday. "It's a way the company shows us appreciation for the hard work you do."

"And we're getting something from the team-building experience," she added. "It's a more fun way to show how we can cooperate with one another and help one another when faced with difficult challenges. And it opens up different ways of communicating for those who are shy."

The company, which went through some layoffs last year but has started hiring again, has maintained quarterly team-building events during leaner times even if it meant settling on less costly excursions. Employees have looked forward to those events, among them a scavenger hunt, crab feasts, bowling and "Survivor"-style challenges, said Rermgosakul, who has worked at the company as a project analyst for three years.

A recent survey of corporate executives released by Accountemps, a staffing company, indicated that most are willing to take steps to retain employees as the economy improves. While respondents weren't asked about moon bounces and laser tag, roughly half said they would promote top performers or raise salaries, and about 40 percent said they would invest more in professional development.

In another recent survey, more than 50 percent of businesses reported that employee morale is down or viewed negatively in their organizations. In addition, 32 percent believe maintaining employee engagement and productivity is the most important priority at their company, according to the survey from CheckPoint HR, a human resources firm.

Michelle Danick, a special events representative at Dave & Buster's in Arundel Mills mall in Hanover, said business began picking up with companies willing to spend a little more around the end of last year. One client, The Geek Squad computer repair company, has signed a contract to come in for monthly team-building as a way to motivate new employees.

"I don't know if people are doing better and hiring new employees, but our phones are off the hook," Danick said. "We are not having to make cold calls."

But Danick said her corporate business survived even during this recession. "As the economy has taken a downturn, people have been looking for ways to use what money they have to ... have fun," she said. "It's really worked to our advantage."

In fact, companies are often among the best repeat customers, Danick said.

Among the referee-led team-building activities are the Ultimate Quest, a competitive scavenger hunt spread throughout the facility, and the Dave & Buster's Great Race, a competition modeled after the TV show "The Amazing Race" that includes 25 interactive tasks such as bowling or video games. Winning teams are rewarded with T-shirts or pint glasses. The events typically cost up to \$25 a person.

"It gets them laughing and having fun and cheering," Danick said. "You can have the CEO of a company going against an admin in the competitions we have. It gets everyone on the same page and working together to accomplish tasks and takes people's minds off the trouble they've had at work."

Often, she said, the teams bring together people who may work in different departments and may have barely met.

"It's the idea of working as a team and working to promote leadership and exercise and having fun as a group," she said.

Team-building can result in broad changes to a corporate culture and has been shown to boost a company's performance, said Roxanne Emmerich, chief executive of The Emmerich Group, a workplace consultancy. But for such events to benefit the business, they need to be offered as rewards for measurable changes in performance.