

LEARNING THROUGH ADVENTURE

The marketing director is standing on the wall. In a dark blue tracksuit and a pair of trekking shoes, a crash helmet on his head, his eyes blindfolded ----- the familiar figure looks extremely unreal and alien. Inwardly he is trying to fight back the numbness that is slowly overtaking him at the thought of the impending leap. In a few seconds he is to take a backward leap from the six-foot high wall into the outstretched arms of his teammates, standing below. And he discovers, with a shock, that even after all these years of working together he cannot trust them.

The divisional sales team is only halfway through its task and has already learned a few lessons. The task crossing a wild scenic river in rafts (to be pieced together by the team itself), locating the injured survivor of an imaginary plane crash and then bringing him across the river for necessary medical care - seemed formidable at first. But now, half of the task successfully accomplished, the remaining part does not appear to be so outrageously impossible after all. The team, therefore, goes about planning the transport of the injured survivor across the river. Certain team rules have changed in the meantime - even the wildest of ideas are not shot down before giving them due consideration and views offered by team members are judged by their merit rather than the hierarchical position of the persons that they came from.

The two scenarios described above are not works of fantasy; they are a part of the latest instructional methodology of executive training that has taken corporate America by storm. Already a \$100 million industry and serving roughly 14% of corporate America, outdoor experimental training, popularly known as adventure learning, takes managers away from their sedentary office routines to the vast countryside for activities ranging from canyon crossing and rock climbing to kayaking and extended camping trips in the wilderness, with an aim to help them develop a 'visceral vision.'

Adventure learning includes a variety of outdoor activities. These fall under two broad categories - the 'rope

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courses' (canyon crossing, rope walking and pole-vaulting) and the 'group adventure courses' (sailing, backpacking and rescue missions) - that are employed to address group-centred issues like problem-solving, leadership, teamwork and communication on the one - hand and personal growth issues like risk-taking, stress-handling, self-awareness and peer trust on the other.

Like sensitivity training, adventure learning also dates back to World War II and is an outgrowth of the first

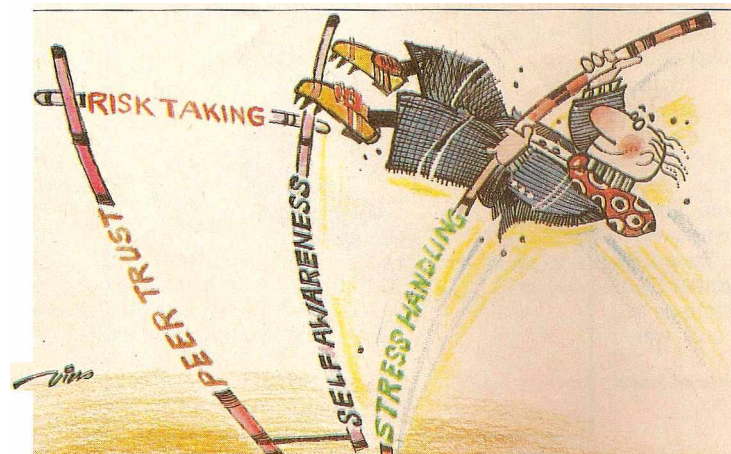
adventure-based education programme started at a school, named 'Outward Bound,' on the coast of Wales. The programme, which originally- offered a month-long course in seamanship and survival skills aimed at 'strengthening an individual both physically and spiritually,' took almost 45 years to metamorphose itself into its current shape. It is only during the last five years that it has secured a firm grip on the corporate clientele. And now at last adventure learning is about to make inroads into India.

- Adventure learning is not a mere romp in the woods or swinging through the trees, as a casual look at it might perhaps suggest. Nor would it be right to discard it lightly as one of those mindless fads that the crazy Americans are forever coming up with. It is founded on the basic tenets of experiential learning that forms the basis of all

modern training systems. Not only do behavioural scientists agree that we learn best by 'doing' but even conventional wisdom has it in the popular saying: what I hear, I forget. What I see, I know. What I do, I understand.

The entire range of simulation techniques from role playing and in-basket tasks to simulated cockpit flying and mock fire drills that are widely used in all conventional training programmes, emphasise learning by doing. The underlying theoretical framework maintains

The latest executive training technique that is the rage in corporate America is adventure learning. It involves strenuous activities like kayaking, but helps executives develop a visceral vision



that learning is faster and better when it takes place on all the three levels - cognition, affection and action.

Adventure learning, in effect, carries the conventional simulation techniques one step further in that it takes the simulated situations out of the air conditioned syndicate rooms to the real outdoor settings. In a learning culture that is increasingly 'information-rich but experience-poor,' adventure learning intends to provide the experiential anchorage for empowering learners to actively reflect on and use their personal experiences in the corporate setting. If the outdoor settings bear little resemblance to the business environs, it is more than made up for by the carefully-constructed metaphors and heightened physical involvement of the trainees. And the results are at times astounding.

Last year, Donovan Associates', (one of the premier organisations which conducts adventure learning programmes), John Donovan recounted an interesting anecdote in an interview with *T&D Journal*, about a group on a sailing programme. The group was sailing for quite some time without making any real headway as the boat kept on going back and forth. Nobody noticed that they had not been going anywhere until one person realised they had passed a buoy marked '27' over and over again. Much later, after the group was back in office, members of the same work group were attending a planning meeting, kept going around in circles without getting anywhere. One person recognised the pattern they had fallen into and wrote on a piece of paper 'buoy 27' and placed it on the table. The group got the message.

COMFORT ZONES

One major concern frequently expressed about adventure learning is the safety factor. After all, an adventure in the wilderness can never be entirely free of risk for the sedentary manager, fine though it would be for the seasoned trekker. The concern is quite valid and a new technique can never gain widespread appeal if it is considered to be physically risky. But then a major methodological component of adventure learning is the perceived risk which is necessary to bring people out of their comfort zones. In reality, however, it is quite safe, as every adventure learning activity is conducted under expert supervision and is provided with intensive backup safety systems. The data gathered by the Oklahoma-based International Safety Network (ISN) and published in *Training* [May 1991] show that the weighted overall in-

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jury rate for all adventure learning activities is as low as 1.01 per million participant hours. The 'high rope' courses which are perceived to be the riskiest activity actually involve only 0.55 injuries per million participant hours while sports and recreational activities like volleyball, tennis and soccer account for an injury rate of 31.90 per million participant hours. Besides, injuries can occur even during non-activity time (eating, personal time) at the rate of 0.15 cases out of every million participant hours.

While fierce debate continues on the, operational and methodological aspects, the question that has assumed singular importance concerns the bottomline issue: does adventure learning work? What remains when the fun and games in the woods are over? How much of it can be transferred back to work?

A CLEAR LINK

Such issues, however, can never be addressed in absolute terms. A training technique is only a tool and can be as good as the quality of facilitation that goes with it. Metaphors, however powerful, become meaningless and fail to leave a stable impression on the trainees if a clear link is not established between the simulated experience and the actual work. When these and other prerequisites like a proper need analysis are met, adventure learning seems to hold promise. Besides, the Current trends also seem to suggest that the corporate clientele is increasingly finding the new technique meaningful. It is difficult to imagine that business leaders like Du Pont, AT&T, and Omega Computers would be spending huge sums on adventure learning as they have been doing if its value was poorly realised.

The trend is also catching on in India. Organisations offering vast acreage of land and outdoor adventure sports facilities and promising a weekend of fun-learn activities for the managers are coming up. The first learning centre to provide full-fledged adventure learning is likely to come up on the outskirts of Calcutta. The blueprint for such a centre has already been drawn up by a Calcutta-based organisation and plans are afoot to bring together

sports and training professionals for the purpose.

As things stand now, the days do not seem to be far off when Indian executives will have a taste of the great outdoors while learning the ropes.

