

MANAGEMENT training – urgh! The very mention of it would usually raise my heckles in a gesture of proletariat defiance. Corporate wonderboys divested of their suits and boots, in a compass-finding bonding frenzy; thinking outside their box and building teams for brownie points.

What a colossal and embarrassing waste of money.

It was with no small amount of scepticism that I arrived at Elite Training at Martlesham Heath in Ipswich, for an afternoon of team building with a group of psychiatric nurses from West Suffolk Hospital.

Elite has an impressive client list – from popstars (*Pop Idol* duo Sam and Mark, who recently proved their manhood on an assault course in Essex for ITV's Saturday morning kids show *CD:UK*) to the BBC, Mars, BT, Ministry of Defence and major pharmaceutical firms.

Elite's managing director, former police inspector Mick Miles and his super-qualified band of trainers, have devised a vast range of physically and mentally taxing exercises to stretch even the very smartest of managers. From suit and tie flip-chart sessions to high ropes and death slides, or outward-bound courses in the Welsh hills, they can tailor courses to whatever skills bosses hope to nurture in their delegations of employees.

There are courses on assertiveness, presentation and communication skills to sessions on the law and telephone technique or managing people, projects, time or meetings.

For the 18 staff nurses, nursing assistants and occupational therapists from Suffolk Mental Health Partnership, however, the afternoon was about learning to problem solve as a team away from the stresses of the wards. They had spent the morning discussing ways of improving standards for patients and ensuring better working lives for staff, as part of a "refocusing" project for their unit. The training afternoon was funded by a research project.

Charge nurse Sarah Ager said: "We hope they will bond as a team and work together. It is a very stressful job that they do and this gives everyone a break and makes them feel valued."

"It's about raising moral," added fellow charge nurse Sue Howlett. "They get to know people they didn't really know before."

Many employees see training days as a jolly – an escape from the drudgery of the office or, in this case, the wards.

It can feel a bit like a school trip where, released from the direct control of the teacher, you have a licence to wear your own clothes, talk in class and generally run wild. But be warned; for those taking things too lightly, there may be penalties to pay back at work. People have been promoted on the strength of team-building days as bosses discover hidden talents. Mucking about and



talking over the trainer could cost you dearly.

Somewhat nervously embedded in a team – "Stuart's Angels" (after the one male member) – I waited anxiously to discover what Elite had in store for us.

I learned we were to complete five activities, clocking up play money for each one, together with a series of "solution seeking tasks", or paper-based brainteasers, for which we could earn extra cash.

The practical tasks were a mixed bag. Digital display, the first of the team activities, saw us scrambling plastic pipes and joints to make a series of letters and numbers only (here's the catch) we weren't allowed to talk. I just about managed a "W".

Plumber's nightmare involved several pieces of piping, peppered with holes, a crystal ball and buckets of water. We were tasked with getting the ball to rise up the pipe from the bottom – a feat that saw team members turn contortionists to cover all the holes. We were rather soggly successful. I bit my tongue when girls higher up the pipe screamed and leapt away as the water touched their fingers, leaving me to absorb the shower.

Stream crossing presented us with a confusing assortment of objects (long nails, balloons, bucket, string, bamboo, scissors, pulley, karabiner, black plastic bags...). Using these we were to carry three eggs across a "stream", without touching the floor; sever contact with them on the other side and bring them back. After much procrastinating and messing about with buckets and string, we realised the easiest solution would be to make a long fishing rod from our bamboo canes and hook the eggs across in the black bin liner. Sadly, we cracked one of our eggs, costing us £50. I was just

disappointed not to have used the balloons. They were such pretty colours.

For the "centipede" task, three of us at a time had to stand on a pair of wooden skis, co-ordinating our feet to move the planks around a short course and backwards to the start line. The moral here was clear – more haste, less speed.

Once we had established a rhythm, we were fine but starting off was difficult. The most obvious solution would have been to have one person count the others in "Left foot after three – One, two, three, Left!" but I shied from insisting on it. I have always been more of a sheep than a shepherd.

Finally, the bomb. Oh, hell. Did I make a pig's ear of this one. We were told we would hear a set of instructions for defusing a "bomb". We would lose £200 every time we asked to have the instructions read again. It was clear no single person could even remember the entire spiel – we would have to divide it up. I was given only four combinations of coloured wires to remember. My brain absolutely resisted the information. One of the four colours exited my head the moment it was uttered. I then had to stand and watch whilst my other team members executed their sequences perfectly, knowing that when it came to my turn, I would blow them all up.

As for the brainteasers – I think I must have lost all my capacity for lateral thinking when that bomb went off. I stared and stared at the conundrums on the paper to no avail.

Stuart's Angels finished the afternoon in second place (no thanks to me) with £5,610 in the bank. If anything, the afternoon had given me a better grasp on my weaknesses,

Sorting the sheep of life from the shepherds

A sceptical **Katy Edwards** joins a group of psychiatric nurses for a day's team building

rather than my strengths. It did confirm, however, my absolute abhorrence of management roles of any kind. I know we have to have leaders. I just don't ever want to be one of them.

The day appeared to have been well received by the West Suffolk party.

Charge nurse Sarah said of her troops: "It was really good recognising people's strengths I didn't know they had. It was also good for me to take a step back and let others take on the leadership role."

Administration assistant Maria Boughton added: "I learned that if you don't have the faintest idea what is going on, you should let someone else sort it out. If I'm faced with a situation where I'm out of my depth at work I will pass it on to Sarah."

With costs of £123 per person, for 14 delegates for a teambuilding day on Martlesham Heath, for example, training could be seen as a luxury. Bosses must have great confidence in the benefits.



Elite's MD Mick Miles believes training is a necessity, especially in the modern world where constant cutbacks means staff are forever being asked to take on more responsibilities.

He said: "Unfortunately one of the first things to go is often the training

budget when really it should be the last to go. People need to be multi-skilled."

Elite uses Belbin profiling to identify core personality traits, intellectual styles and behaviours among team members – from the action-oriented "shaper" who, challenging and dynamic, thrives on pressure but is more likely to offend people's feelings, to more discerning "monitor-evaluator" who will weigh up all the options but lacks the drive and ability to inspire others.

"People answer questions, we do a profile on them and tell them what their preferred roles are in a team," Mick explained.

"Quite often a team won't be performing because a valuable member is missing."

He added that hitherto undetected talents often surface in staff on teambuilding days – good bosses will take note and harness those skills in the workplace.

He explained: "The tasks

themselves are nothing to do with the workplace but the skills that are required to perform them are. We're not judging people on how they perform at work.

"We're getting them to look at the skills they have or need to develop. Bosses often see staff in an entirely different light. That will go back to the workplace with them."

Despite my initial prejudice, I must admit to having enjoyed the afternoon. The trainers were not at all patronising or overbearing – in fact, the whole thing was remarkably jargon free. It was fun, challenging and competitive and I am sure, brought the Suffolk Mental Health Partnership staff closer together. Whether it leads to tangible improvements on the wards at the West Suffolk Hospital remains to be seen. But testimonials from other organisations to have sent staff to Elite claim expenditure on similar exercises are soon repaid in dividends. In future, I will cringe a little less whenever I hear the words management training.

■ For more information look at www.elitetraining.co.uk or contact Elite Training European Ltd on 01473 614102.



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