Get out of the office!

The living sky is the limit for these innovative team-building programs

by Heather R. Ellis

Investing in building a corporate culture that embodies teamwork is as valuable as investing in a corporate benefit program. Strong teams have higher morale and loyalty, they are more creative and productive, they know each others’ strengths and weaknesses and the companies are better able to attract and retain talent.

The usual team-building workshops involve exercises in a climate-controlled meeting room. Participants may even get physical by building paper bridges or throwing imaginary balls. However, two Saskatchewan companies offer alternatives that move people out from the fluorescent lights and under the living sky.
Paws’n’Paddles Wilderness Tours in Potato Lake, Sask. is a sled dog and canoeing excursion company that offers custom small group events. Founded in 2004 by owner-operators Quincy Miller and Miriam Körner, Paws’n’Paddles offers experiences from half-day sled dog tours to longer snowshoe or canoe trips. The company does not specialize in corporate clients; instead, Miller and Körner customize each experience based on who is requesting it. Körner explains that with 15 dogs, the ideal group is eight to 10 people.

Coming out to Potato Lake is a unique experience. “We don’t have a formal corporate program. People come, they leave work behind and focus on getting to know one another in a new way,” says Körner. “When people come, suddenly the internet is gone. There are no more text message interruptions. They see and experience the connection to nature and to the land that we feel. They slow down.”

If a company would prefer a program that includes activities or physical challenges, Miller and Körner can arrange a canoe or snowshoe tour. Participants paddle or snowshoe on a planned route, build a fire together, and participate in activities such as snow sculpture together. Körner has a degree in psychology and has done facilitation if clients request it. Her recommendation, however, is to let the experience provide the team building.

Körner explains that when people sit at the campfire together, stories and questions emerge and people interact in a different way than they do in the workplace. She and Quincy answer questions and share their own experiences or stories from elders in the community.

Paws’n’Paddles is run out of the Körner-Miller home. So coming for a sled dog or canoe experience is almost like being a guest of the family. “When they come here, they are invited to our home, to our living space,” explains Körner. “They are immersed in how people live in the north. It is the biggest compliment to us when visitors go home and tell us that after being here, they go home and re-look at their priorities.”

Brenda Clemens, who with husband Barry Clemens, is the co-owner and operator of Beaver Creek Ranch at Lumsden, Sask. agrees with Körner that removing people from their environment naturally breaks down barriers. Beaver Creek Ranch offers a variety of formal corporate team-building and leadership development programs, but also has informal retreat-like options such as wagon rides and campfire cookouts. “Just a wagon or sleigh ride, you still interact. It still helps create an interactive environment for learning,” says Clemens. She also believes that leaving the office is important to team building, developing creativity and problem-solving. She explains, “If you get out into the country, people are more likely to change. It’s easier to interact. It’s hard to be innovative in a boardroom.”

Beaver Creek Ranch welcomes groups from nine to 30 people and can accommodate larger groups by providing separate, concurrent activities.

Brenda Clemens is a trained facilitator and leadership trainer. Through Beaver Creek Ranch, she and Barry offer two unique team and leadership building programs: Team Tracker and Harness the Horsepower: Equine Assisted Learning.

Team Tracker is an activity that gets everyone’s adrenaline pumping. Teams hike, walk and run through the Lumsden valley,
gathering treasures while they are being tracked by a pursuer (a Beaver Creek staff member) on horseback.

Each player is given an armband at the start of the game. Teams are given a map, a list of treasure to find and a backpack. Each team sets off at a staggered start. Team members must all start and finish the challenge together. As the teams traverse the hills gathering their treasures, they are pursued by a tracker on horseback. If he catches a team member, he takes their armband. Players can continue to assist the team without armbands.

The Team Tracker activity forces teams to plan, communicate and work together while meeting the game’s objective. Teams acquire points at the end for having the most treasure, retaining the most armbands and having the best time. When the teams come in, Brenda and a partner facilitate a debrief, asking questions to guide the learning.

“We talk about the strategy the teams used. For example, we ask, ‘What happened when you rushed?’ Then we talk about it. We explain how the point system is designed like the corporate model of quality, productivity, safety. Quality is your treasure, armbands are your safety, time is your productivity. It’s all important. You don’t want to sacrifice one for the other.”

Although the Team Tracker can appear physically daunting, Clemens insists it isn’t. She says when teams work together it isn’t as challenging as it seems. “You always send the best person for the job, so if the treasure is at the top of the hill, you send your fittest guy. Everyone has value. Everyone on the team has a job. Everyone is empowered.”

Beaver Creek Ranch also offers Harness the Horsepower: Equine-Assisted Learning program. This program has a maximum enrolment of 15 people. Harness the Horsepower is a team-building and leadership development program that is centered on working with horses. No previous horse experience is necessary. The program takes place out of the saddle on the ground. Participants are first taught the safe zone around the horse, so all activities take place in a safe environment.

Working with horses can help teams set new goals for awareness, communication and interactions with others. “There are so many qualities and analogies of good horsemanship that equate to being a good leader,” explains Clemens. “Horses are always looking for leaders. They are looking for trust and respect. Horses are looking for you to be properly assertive.” She gives the example of applying pressure. Horses and teams both respond to pressure. Too little or too much pressure from a leader and a team won’t respond the way a leader wants them to.

During Harness the Horsepower, participants work in pairs to communicate, to guide their horses as a pair through obstacles and to participate in pair and group activities. Clemens has spent her career teaching both riders and horses. She has observed how both learn from the interactions. “Horses live in the moment, so when engaging in exercises with them, you discover how if you change your approach, it changes the outcome.” Clemens debriefs with every group over their experience.

Past participants have ranged from children to CEOs. “We’ve never had anyone not have fun or learn something,” says Clemens. “Our team-building programs engage the participants with a hands-on experience which creates a lasting impression and is the best method for building long-term memory.”

Beaver Creek Ranch can tailor programs for half-day up to three days for corporate clients.