

A Day on the Challenge Course

After breakfast, we begin in the meeting room by introducing a composite of the “best thinking” about high performance teams and the collaborative workplace, accompanied by some key term definitions, models, and plenty of humor and interaction. Often we publish a learning journal with all of these graphics and information included, invite the participants to make notes on the margins, contribute their perspective, and get participants acclimatized to the interactive nature of the day.

Particular emphasis is made and an experiential epiphany is facilitated as to the nature of Mental Models – the specific filters or lenses through which we each view all incoming information. They are truly paradoxical in nature - simultaneously powerful and highly influential, yet subtle and require deliberate challenge to uncover/discover.

Then we declare ourselves a hypothetical team for the day that seeks to find, and understand how to return to “the zone” of high performance as defined by the Team Performance model.

Next, we head outdoors to engage in a series of challenges or initiatives that are designed to mirror workplace interpersonal dynamics, often custom-designed to highlight whatever objectives were discovered during the retreat design and planning process. We purposefully create a climate where it is safe to have some really meaningful dialogue during the debrief portion: about how the challenge that just unfolded was met, and how it might parallel how we interact together in the workplace. That’s why this tool is so effective – it is non-judgmental and “safe” to draw hypothetical analogies between the fun initiative we just experienced and a work project or process and to analyze the inherent communication challenges both situations pose.

This purposeful debrief is conducted in an outdoor gazebo built for this purpose amongst the shade of 100-year-old pine trees. There is a certain magic the outdoors creates that opens the mind and the heart in ways that simply cannot be duplicated in a classroom setting.

To be candid, we have evolved this approach into a powerful learning adjunct. The experience evolves to a crescendo with the Kodak-moment nature of the high elements that are available to those who choose to participate. There are important and engaging roles for all participants, regardless of physical abilities. People find themselves having fun and tossing aside some of the veneers that evolve in the workplace and life. The end result is that they often view their colleagues and themselves in entirely different ways. Trust levels rise. Communication is less guarded and more authentic.

What we want to be very careful to harness is the discretionary energy that is unleashed during this day-long experience. This is facilitated through a great meal, attention to creature comforts by the staff and the setting here at the Retreat, followed perhaps by a campfire – in essence a loosely structured evening together to solve problems of the workplace and build relationships over a beer or whatever.

That evening’s time is when the real payoff regarding the investment of this day on the challenge course happens. The next day’s work in the meeting room on business or cultural specifics is inevitably more honest, open, and productive, netting the tangible results around which the entire retreat experience has been designed.