

The perceived success of teambuilding interventions in South African organisations

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the importance attached to teams, teamwork and teambuilding in modern organisational life, this study reports on whether participants perceive teambuilding interventions as successful or unsuccessful, and reports on the relationship between respondent characteristics and the perception of teambuilding success. These aims were examined in two phases, namely by developing ten hypotheses and by testing these hypotheses. Hypotheses were stated in the positive, namely that a relationship exists between the [XYbh] YX j Uf]UV`Yg`UbX`dYfWdh]cbg`cZH`Ua Vi]X]b[`gi WfggZ`UbX`h`Y` non-parametric Chi-square test was used to test the relationships between variables. Thtee hypotheses were accepted, namely: there is a relationship between the respondent's level in the organisation and perception of teambuilding success; there is a relationship between the type of event and perception of teambuilding success; and there]g`U`fY`Uh]cbg\]d`VYtk`YYb`h`Y`ZUW`]H`c`f`U` `]Uh]cb`UbX`dYfWdh]cb`cZ` teambuilding success.

Key words: teambuilding, perceived success, type of intervention

Introduction

The use of teams has become a prominent trend of modern organisational life (Thompson 2004; Hackman 2003; Frost 2001; Kreitner & Kinicki 2001; Fisher 2000: xxi) with Offerman and Spiros (2001: 376) stating that teams “are becoming very big business”. Kriek (2003), Stander (2003), Grutter and Faull (1998) and Veldsman

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(1995) point out that this trend is also followed by South African organisations. In addition to focusing on teams, organisations make extensive use of teambuilding as part of growing and developing staff; as Buller and Bell (1986: 305) remark: “One of the most popular intervention techniques in organisation development (OD) is teambuilding.” Indeed, it has been found that it is the intervention used most frequently in planned change efforts (Offerman & Spiros 2001; Covin & Kilmann 1991). However, in spite of the popularity thereof, and the capital expense involved therein (Williams, Graham & Baker 2002: 45), research on the success of teambuilding remains inconclusive and challenging (Rushmer 1997). It would seem that in South Africa, the international trends are followed, with teambuilding being a prevalent practice within South African organisations, but not receiving much research attention (Kriek 2007). It is the perceived success of teambuilding practices in South Africa (from a participant perspective) that is the focus of this research.

Purpose and research objectives

Teambuilding can be defined as “interventions designed to improve ... effectiveness in working together by confronting and resolving problems” (Boss 1983: 66). Hackman and Wageman (2005: 272) refine this improvement of effectiveness to refer to “productive output”, “social processes” and “well-being of individual team members”. These three outcomes of teambuilding are augmented by a fourth, “organizational alignment” proposed by Thompson (2004: 36). In the current study, the following definition of teambuilding was used:

Teambuilding is a specific intervention to address issues relating to the development of the team. Typically, it consists of a one (or more) day programme focused on improvement of interpersonal relations, improved productivity or better alignment with organisational goals. Examples include emphasis on fun and enjoyment (such as paintball, river rafting), simulation of workplace dynamics (such as ropes courses), assessment (such as personality type or roles assessments) or problem-solving activities (indoor or outdoor experiential games).

Organisations utilise a variety of types of teambuilding to facilitate interventions (Hayes 1997; Brawley & Paskevich 1997: 16–17), for a variety of purposes, including improving interpersonal relationships, increasing motivation, aligning with change programmes, increasing productivity, finding direction and resolving conflict (Kriek 2007). Teambuilding had become specialised (Brawley & Paskevich 1997: 16–17) with different activities, techniques and instruments used in interventions in South African organisations. Examples include psychometric assessment to ascertain roles (Stander 2004) and personality (Gmeiner & Van Wyk 2001), adventure-

based interventions as described by Kriek (2006) and Heunis (1997), as well as psychodynamic interventions, notably the Tavistock approach (Cilliers 2000). Beer (1980) distinguishes between four approaches to teambuilding, namely goal-setting, interpersonal relations, role expectations and managerial grid approaches. Hayes (1997: 61) distinguishes between “the interpersonal approach, the role-definition approach, the values approach and the task-based approach. Levi (2001: 311) states that categorising “the many different types of programs that typically are used for team building is difficult because there is no agreed-on set of techniques”. He distinguishes five different types, namely goal-setting, role definition, interpersonal process skills, cohesion building and problem-solving approaches. French and Bell (1985) mention that the intervention can have a task focus, a group process or a relationship focus, or a structural approach. In all, it seems that a variety of different types can be distinguished, many of which are employed in the South African context.

In spite of the different types and the prevalence of the application of teambuilding interventions, no clear answers on the success thereof is emerging. To assist in determining success, the four levels of learning outcomes proposed by Kirkpatrick (1976) and summarised by Williams et al. (2002: 48–49) can be a helpful guide, namely:

- *Reactions*: trainees’ perceptions of the value and quality of the training
- *Learning*: whether trainees have, in fact, learned the knowledge, skills or attitudes that they were supposed to
- *Behaviours*: whether, the acquired knowledge, skills or attitudes affect behaviour on the job
- *Results*: the impact of the training on business results such as productivity, quality, time or customer satisfaction.

Although the aim of the paper is not to measure the success of the interventions, the literature review indicates that it is a critical element of teambuilding and has received scholarly attention. Some proclaim success (Mazany, Francis & Sumich 1995), others point to the lack of success of teambuilding (Wolff 1988; Woodman & Sherwood 1980), while some indicate that the results are elusive and inconclusive (Rushmer 1997). A number of different types of success outcomes have been studied, including processes (for example, communication, coordination, decision-making), team performance (for example, quality, quantity, efficiency) and affective outcomes (for example, socialisation and trust) (Klein, Salas, Burke, Goodwin, Halpin, DiazGranados et al. 2006). It would seem that the evaluation of the success of such interventions is hampered by design difficulties, including pre-experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and that possible remedies for using time-series studies

have not yet been used to a large extent. Within the qualitative research paradigm, the preferred method seems to be that of case studies describing interventions and determining the success of single interventions (for example, Kriek 2003; Rushmer 1997). A number of factors could have influenced the lack of conclusive results including:

- Difficulty in comparisons across settings and types (Offerman & Spiros 2001: 376)
- Application of experimental rigour not satisfactorily executed (Hardy & Crace 1997: 6; De Meuse & Liebowitz 1981: 373)
- Methodological issues such as control, reality and certainty, as well as the difficulty of distinguishing an intervention from the influence of other organisation development influences (Rushmer 1997).

The first of these outcomes relates to the second of the types of data that De Meuse and Liebowitz (1981) identified as preferred sources for research into teambuilding. They mention anecdotal evidence, simple reaction measures, behavioural changes and organisational changes as sources of data. The current study focuses on the reactions of participants and reports on the perceived success of teambuilding by participants. Studies into the reactions of participants usually use data before, during or after the event and analyse the results. These studies tend to report on a number of participants' in a *single* intervention or programme, as local studies by Kriek (2003), Gmeiner and Van Wyk (2001) and Cilliers (2000) illustrate. Although these studies give an indication of the success experienced by the individuals on that particular intervention, they do not tell us how teambuilding is perceived across different types and approaches of teambuilding and across a variety of interventions. Thus, it is not clear whether the majority of participants perceive the intervention as successful or unsuccessful. However, no research could be found on the perceived success of these interventions in local organisations. Therefore, the research objectives of this study were:

- To ascertain whether teambuilding is perceived as being successful or unsuccessful overall
- To determine the relationship between respondent characteristics and the overall perception of teambuilding success.

It is widely accepted in the literature that perceptions (along with other factors such as motivation, attitudes, personality, lifestyle and learning ability) are a key individual driver of behaviour. In the field of marketing, for example, perceptions (as in 'perceived quality') are strongly associated with buying behaviour and brand equity

(Aaker 1996; Lindstrom 2005). Lindstrom (2005) suggests that one of the key tasks of marketing is to narrow the gap between perceptions and reality. In organisations, perceptions play a similar role in determining employee behaviour and decision-making. Vithessonthi (2007) found that employees' perceived participation in decision-making processes related to change (a privatisation process) reduced their resistance to change. However, Vithessonthi could not find a relationship between perceived participation in decision-making processes and positive change behaviour. The implications thereof may be important for this research. A positive perception of team building interventions may, therefore, remove resistance and create a generally positive mindset, but may not be related to behaviour changes. Kassinis and Panayiotou (2006) found a positive relationship between CEO perceptions of the importance of stakeholders and their performance with regard to environmental performance, suggesting that perceptions can play a role in determining employee behaviour and decision-making.

Therefore, positive perceptions of teambuilding interventions should, as a minimum, limit resistance and create a positive climate for implementing the required behaviour changes. In a best-case environment, teambuilding could also provide a strong basis for changes in employee behaviour and decision-making.

Research design and methodology

Sample

Master of Business Leadership (MBL) students in their first year at the Graduate School of Business Leadership (GSBL) of the University of South Africa were used as a convenience sample for the study. There were 349 participating respondents, but after missing value analysis was conducted, 314 useable questionnaires remained. The sample displayed the following demographic characteristics:

- With respect to gender, 59.2% were male and 40.8% were female. Although these percentages are not reflective of the population as a whole, they do reflect the demographics of students at the GSBL.
- With respect to the level occupied in their organisation, 12.2% were in top management, 69.4% were in middle management and 18.4% were professional employees. Again, this reflects the typical population of MBL students, who tend to be in middle and higher management positions.
- Respondents had been working fulltime for an average of 10.4 years and had been with their organisation for an average of 5.9 years and in their current positions for an average of 3 years.

In line with the demographics of MBL and MBA students in South Africa, the sample was skewed towards males, management levels and larger organisations (more than 80% of respondents were employed in organisations with more than 100 employees). Although the sample represented a spread of sectors, the banking sector (23% of respondents), public sector (19%), manufacturing (13%) and mining (12%) were strongly represented in the sample, again reflecting the student demographic profile of the GSBL.

With specific reference to teambuilding events, 63.1% had participated in an event within the year prior to the survey, while only 1.3% had never participated in a teambuilding event. Most of the teambuilding events had been with a functional group (50.4%) or with a mixed group from the organisation (34.1%). A median of 20 participants were involved per event.

With reference to the teambuilding design, most events (80.6%) lasted for two days or less, while 77% involved some form of psychometric assessment. MBTI (Myers Briggs Type Indicator) (44.1%), team roles assessment such as Team Management Index or Belbin (28.8%), and climate or culture assessments (22%) were the most popular assessment tools used. Most events were conducted both indoors and outdoors (55.2%), while 23.9% were conducted only indoors and 20.9% only outdoors. For outdoor activities, problem-solving games were by far the most popular intervention used (59.1%). External facilitators were commonly used (74.3%).

Only 47.9% of respondents reported that an evaluation of the teambuilding event had been conducted, and 28.9% reported that follow-up action had been taken.

Procedure

The relationships between respondent characteristics, organisational factors and intervention characteristics and the perception of teambuilding success were examined in two phases, namely:

- Firstly, hypotheses were developed. Since the purpose of the study was to identify the characteristics that influenced perceptions of teambuilding success, hypotheses were stated in the positive, namely that a relationship exists between the identified variables and perceptions of teambuilding success.
- Secondly, these hypotheses were tested, using only respondents who had participated in a teambuilding event in the past two years. Since most of the data were nominal or ordinal, the non-parametric Chi-square test was used to test the relationships between variables. Rejection of a hypothesis therefore implied

that no significant relationship exists between the identified variables and the perception of teambuilding success, while hypotheses were accepted when the Pearson's χ^2 was smaller than 0.1 (at the 90% level of confidence) or 0.05 (at the 95% level of confidence).

Hypotheses

In order to explore the potential differences in perception between respondent groups, a number of hypotheses were posed in order to determine the relationship between individual characteristics, organisational factors and intervention characteristics with respect to perceived success. Ten hypotheses evolved out of the exploration and are presented in the following sections.

Relationship between individual characteristics and perceptions of teambuilding success

Two respondent characteristics were used to examine this, namely gender and years of work experience (as a proxy for age). Many teambuilding interventions have a potentially inherent bias (for example, many adventure activities may be perceived to be more 'male' oriented or more suited to younger participants). Although facilitators will generally strive to mitigate such biases, there may still be differences in perceptions, especially between gender and age groups. The following hypotheses were therefore developed:

H₁: There is a relationship between gender and perception of teambuilding success.

H₂: There is a relationship between years of work experience and perception of teambuilding success.

Relationship between organisational factors and perceptions of teambuilding success

As a direct influence on human and, therefore, team relationships, certain organisational characteristics could play a role in the perception of teambuilding success. Characteristics selected for this analysis were the size of the organisation, the level of the respondent in the organisation and the type of organisation in terms of whether they are public sector or private sector organisations.

The following hypotheses were therefore developed:

- H₃: There is a relationship between organisation size and perception of teambuilding success.
- H₄: There is a relationship between the respondent's level in the organisation and perception of teambuilding success.
- H₅: There is a relationship between the type of organisation (public or private sector) and perception of teambuilding success.

Relationship between intervention characteristics and perceptions of teambuilding success

The intervention itself is the most immediate influence on perceptions on teambuilding success. Intervention characteristics selected for this analysis were the participants in the intervention (for example, only the immediate work team or the whole organisation); the number of participants; the duration of the teambuilding intervention; where the event took place (indoors, outdoors or both); the type of outdoor event (game play or adventure); the use of psychometric testing; the facilitator (external or internal); and whether follow-up action was taken after the event.

The following hypotheses were therefore developed:

- H₆: There is a relationship between the type of event and perception of teambuilding success.
- H₇: There is a relationship between the type of outdoors activity and perception of teambuilding success.
- H₈: There is a relationship between the use of psychometric testing and perception of teambuilding success.
- H₉: There is a relationship between the facilitator affiliation and perception of teambuilding success.
- H₁₀: There is a relationship between the follow-up actions taken and perception of teambuilding success.
- H₁₁: There is a relationship between the use of psychometric testing and perception of teambuilding success.
- H₁₂: There is a relationship between the facilitator affiliation and perception of teambuilding success.
- H₁₃: There is a relationship between the follow-up actions taken and perception of teambuilding success.

Results

Research objective 1: Perceived success

This part of the study explores the extent to which teambuilding is perceived as being successful or unsuccessful. The overall perception of teambuilding success was measured using a six-point scale, as follows:

- 1 = Extremely successful
- 2 = Fairly successful
- 3 = Successful
- 4 = Unsuccessful
- 5 = Fairly unsuccessful
- 6 = Extremely unsuccessful.

From the results, it emerged that 9.2% of the respondents perceived teambuilding interventions as extremely successful, while 34.3% reported a fairly successful verdict. The largest part of respondents (41.8%) reported that they perceived teambuilding interventions as successful, 11.2% perceived teambuilding interventions as unsuccessful, 1.6% as fairly unsuccessful and 2% as extremely unsuccessful. It should be noted at this point that by far the majority of respondents (85.3%) perceived the teambuilding intervention as successful to some extent. For the purposes of further analysis, these were then grouped together as 'successful' (ratings of 1, 2 and 3) and 'unsuccessful' (ratings of 4, 5 and 6).

Research objective 2: Relationship between respondent characteristics and the perception of teambuilding success

This research objective was completed by analysing the data using SSPS. The results of the analysis of hypotheses are given in tabular format. In each case, the particular hypothesis, the number of respondents (n), the Pearson's Chi-square value and an indication of whether the hypothesis is accepted or rejected are given.

Discussion

The results are summarised in Table 1.

From the results, it is clear that only three hypotheses are accepted, namely H_4 , H_6 and H_9 . This suggests that there is statistical evidence of a relationship between perceived teambuilding success and:

Table 1: List of hypotheses

Hypothesis	n	Categories	Pearson's Chi-square	Accept or reject?
H ₁ : There is a relationship between gender and perception of teambuilding success.	213	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Male Female 	.864	Reject
H ₂ : There is a relationship between years of work experience and perception of teambuilding success.	209	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less than 10 years 11 to 20 years More than 20 years 	.624	Reject
H ₃ : There is a relationship between organization size and perception of teambuilding success.	198	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less than 100 employees 100 to 1 000 employees More than 1 000 employees 	.189	Reject
H ₄ : There is a relationship between the respondent's level in the organisation and perception of teambuilding success.	206	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top management Other management Non-management 	.041	Accept
H ₅ : There is a relationship between the type of organization (public or private sector) and perception of teambuilding success.	165	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public sector and NGOs (non-profit) Private sector 	.131	Reject
H ₆ : There is a relationship between teambuilding event scope and perception of teambuilding success.	211	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Functional work team Mixed teams within organisation Mixed teams (more than one organisation) Whole organisation 	.829	Reject
H ₇ : There is a relationship between the number of event participants and perception of teambuilding success.	210	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Up to 10 participants 11 to 20 participants 21 to 30 participants More than 30 participants 	.329	Reject
H ₈ : There is a relationship between the type of event and perception of teambuilding success.	211	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indoors only Outdoors only Indoors and outdoors combined 	.082	Accept
H ₉ : There is a relationship between the type of outdoors activity and perception of teambuilding success.	58	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Game play and problem-solving Adventure activities 	.422	Reject
H ₁₀ : There is a relationship between the event duration and perception of teambuilding success.	214	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less than 1 day 1 day 2 days 3 days More than 3 days 	.757	Reject
H ₁₁ : There is a relationship between the use of psychometric testing and perception of teambuilding success.	214	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Psychometric testing used Psychometric testing not used 	.661	Reject
H ₁₂ : There is a relationship between the facilitator and perception of teambuilding success.	207	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External facilitator Internal facilitator 	.009	Accept
H ₁₃ : There is a relationship between the follow-up actions taken and perception of teambuilding success.	205	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow-up action taken Follow-up action not taken 	.766	Reject

* Hypotheses were accepted when the Pearson's χ^2 k Ug'ga U'Yf'h'Ub '\$'%'fU'h'h'Y' - \$i 'Yj Y'cZV&b XYbWf'cf '\$' \$) 'fU'h'h'Y' -) i 'Yj Y'cZV&b XYbWf'

- The respondent's level in the organisation
- The type of event (whether it is outdoors, indoors or a combination)
- Facilitator affiliation.

These findings are discussed in the following sections.

The relationship between perceptions of teambuilding success and organisational level

Figure 1 shows that top managers often perceive teambuilding interventions as more successful than other managers or employees. Given that top managers are often the initiators of teambuilding interventions, this is perhaps not altogether surprising. Overall, 97% of top managers rated the teambuilding intervention as successful, as opposed to 82.6% of other managers and 82.2% of non-managers.

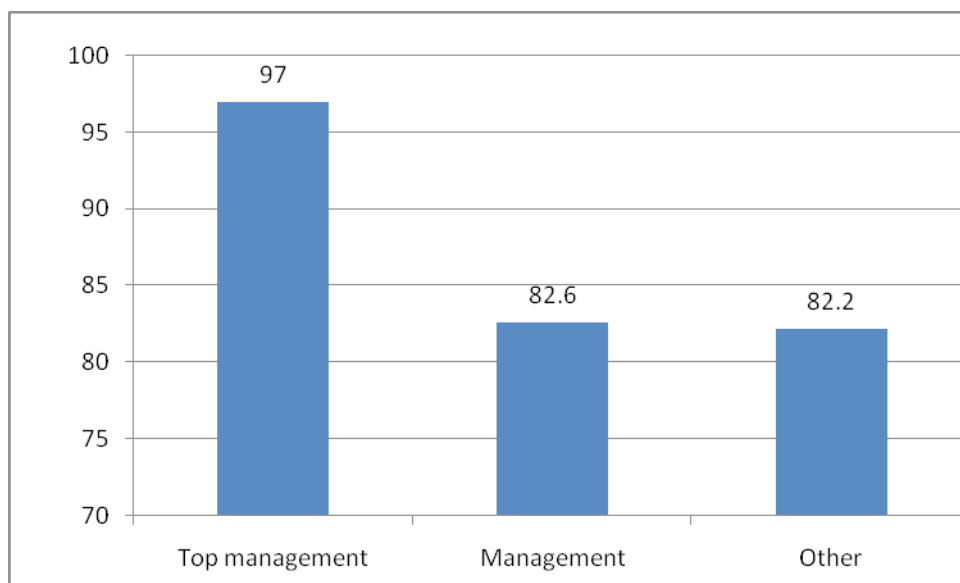


Figure 1: The relationship between perceptions of teambuilding success and organisational level

The relationship between perceptions of teambuilding success and where the intervention took place

Respondents reported that they perceive 'outdoors only' interventions as more successful (success rating of 94.5%) than either 'indoors only' interventions (success

rating of 82.8%) or combinations of indoor and outdoor activities (success rating of 82.2%). Figure 2 depicts the ratings for this factor. The analysis further suggests that the specific type of activity (for example, game-playing and problem-solving or adventure activities) does not have a relationship with perceived success and is therefore not as important as the fact that it takes place outdoors.

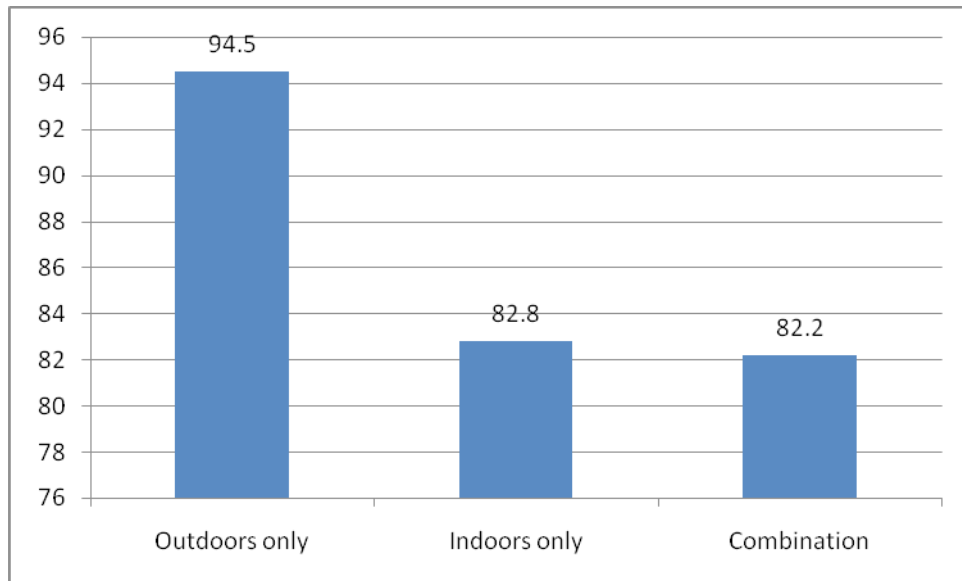


Figure 2: The relationship between perceptions of teambuilding success and where the intervention took place

The relationship between perceptions of teambuilding success and where the intervention took place

It has long been accepted ‘wisdom’ that it is better to use external facilitators, who should be objective and without organisational baggage, to facilitate interventions. The research results seem to bear this out, as respondents indicated a higher level of perceived success when external facilitators were used (88.4%) compared with using internal facilitators (74.6%). It seems more likely that internal facilitators (perhaps from another department or division) will be used to facilitate interventions with smaller functional work teams (in more than 60% of cases), for interventions of two days or shorter (in 84% of cases). Internal facilitators are also more likely to facilitate indoors-only interventions (in 34% of cases, compared with 21% for external facilitators).

Conclusion

It is a limitation of the study that it surveyed a sample of graduate students, the majority of whom were in middle to senior management. The effect of the first of these limitations is probably mitigated by the requirement of at least four-year management experience as entry qualification into the programme. In fact, the sample indicated an average of 4.4 years of experience, which probably limits the effect sometimes found by student groups. However, it does not address the limitation that the study is limited to a particular segment of the workforce (namely, graduates). Indeed, further research in this regard is necessary. The study is skewed towards middle and senior management, and further exploration of the perceived success of other segments of the workforce is merited.

Another limitation of the study is its focus on 'perceived' success. This is based on responses of participants *ex post facto* in relation to the intervention. However, researchers have found that respondents often provide answers that they believe to be correct and that they sometimes do not have the ability to express what they really mean (Rushmer 1997: 253). Furthermore, although participants might report a certain inclination towards teambuilding, it does not necessarily mean that their behaviour will correspond with what they report. Thus, although a majority of participants might regard the intervention as positive, this might not translate into changed workplace behaviour or performance increases. It is also not clear whether the perceived success is based on participants' evaluation of success in terms of interpersonal or task-related criteria, or whether it could be based on perceptions such as the notion that management 'cares' or that a change inflection point can be attained.

However, although not without limitations, the study does allow a picture to emerge of the use of teambuilding and its perceived success in South African organisations, including the following observations:

- It had previously been ascertained that teambuilding interventions are prevalent in South Africa (Kriek 2007) and that teambuilding is widely used (Cilliers 2000). This study raises the issue that the popularity of this type of intervention might be due to the positive regard in which its success is held in local organisations in general, and at senior levels in particular. Future research into the relationship between the use and perceived success of teambuilding interventions is recommended.
- The study indicates that respondents do not perceive different types of interventions as more successful than others. Thus, although a variety of different types of interventions are used – for example, goal-setting, role definition, interpersonal

process skills, cohesion building and problem-solving types (Levi 2001: 311–314) or types used locally including assessment (Stander 2004; Gmeiner & Van Wyk 2001), adventure therapy (Heunis 1997) and a psychodynamic approach (Cilliers 2000) – no statistically significant differences in perception with respect to any of the approaches emerges. This is surprising, as it indicates that the intervention as such is of importance rather than the content thereof, as indicated by Rushmer (1997) in her assessment that the intervention communicates that management cares. Further research to ascertain the reasons why participants regard interventions as successful is needed.

- A variety of assessment instruments have been developed and are used to facilitate teambuilding. Among these are team roles (Belbin 1981; Margerison & McCann 1990) and personality assessment, such as MBTI (Gmeiner & Van Wyk 2001). However, no statistically significant preference could be ascertained to indicate that the use thereof is regarded as successful. More analysis of this result is certainly merited in view of assertions with respect to the success of such tools from international quarters.
- From the study, it can be ascertained that outdoor settings are perceived to be more successful than indoor or mixed contexts. A review of the literature indicates that a variety of contexts are used for teambuilding, often forming part of the creation of “disorienting dilemma” (McEvoy & Buller 1997). This requires teams to create their own capacity to succeed in these circumstances and thus link the training directly to personal experience. This supports the benefits of adult learning theory or androgogy, namely that adults learn more when training is linked to personal experience, as in outdoor experiential activities (Williams et al. 2002). Study on the impact of context on the perceived success of teambuilding interventions is indicated, as the very setting of the intervention could perhaps create positive regard towards the type of intervention, as suggested by the study of Mazany and colleagues (Mazany, Francis & Sumich 1997).
- The indication that outdoor settings are perceived as more successful than others also points to issues regarding the training of organisation development consultants and human resource managers. It is clear that attention should be given to equipping these facilitators with the required knowledge and skills to operate in an environment that is demanding in its search for success.

Even though the present study generated information on the use and nature of teambuilding as well as its perceived success, this serves only to provide the basis from which critical issues of the benefits of teambuilding for organisations should be explored. This research seems to underscore the notion that teambuilding is a

widely used phenomenon (Kriek 2007), and although further study is warranted, it would seem that the use of teambuilding is based on a perception of its success. This study could provide the impetus for further study in the field of teambuilding in South African organisations and could assist in providing managers, researchers and practitioners with indications of which interventions are regarded as successful.

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