

# HR: when team building goes horribly wrong

It's a recognised tactic: under the guise of sport or corporate team building, put your staff under stress and see how they cope. It's even used as a part of interview technique - hold a cocktail party or lunch and watch candidates interact or choose the wrong fork. But what happens if they go wrong? It did in a sweat lodge.

Track days, even go-karting, are popular forms of team-building exercise and, as one enters the circuit there are big signs telling participants that motor racing is dangerous.

Adventure breaks - rock climbing or canoeing - are possibly more dangerous.

The common factor is that participants are required to sign a waiver absolving the organisers from any liability in the case of injury or death and makes it clear that participants are volunteers.

That raises two questions:

first, what happens in the case of recklessness or negligence by the organiser; and

secondly, what if the participants are not volunteers but pressed into attending by their employer?

Those questions are best answered by lawyers in different jurisdictions because there is no globally applicable answer. But they do raise a global issue of risk management for HR departments. In the pursuit of stress-testing employees, how far should you go?

The answer, seemingly, is not very far.

James Arthur Ray has made such a name for himself that Wikipedia has not dumped an entry relating to him as an advert. In fact, a Google search for "James Arthur Ray" generates almost seven million results. He is widely described as a "motivational speaker" and he runs under the tag-line "Balance is bogus!"

He is the author of several books, one of which has made it to the New York Times best seller list. He claims expertise in "harmonic wealth" and how to use spirituality to improve oneself.

52 year old Ray runs a variety of courses and in October last year he ran one called "Spiritual Warrior" in northern Arizona, renting an isolated property for the "retreat" which included exercises and a two hour session in a "sweat lodge." It cost almost USD10,000 to attend the weekend away from it all in what Ray promised would be "the most intense experience of their lives."

Ray's brand of motivation is not dissimilar to those adopted by personal trainers, who demand that participants in physical sports push themselves beyond the limits they feel appropriate. He was clear: two hours in the sweat lodge would be tough, some would feel weak, some would feel nauseous and some would want to leave. They should all, he said, push past those feelings to gain inner strength, to help them achieve greater things in their lives.

And as the participants complained of feeling weak and ill, he told chivvied them along, telling them not to let their weaknesses control their lives.

Sitting at a desk, it all sounds pretty hackneyed stuff.

But two people collapsed in the sweat lodge. They were taken to hospital where they died later that day. Another, very weakened, was taken to hospital where a coma was followed by death.

Last week, Ray surrendered to police who have investigated the deaths and he has now been charged with manslaughter. He denies the charges, saying that the deaths were "a terrible accident."

But the Arizona police who have charged him say that their investigations show that Ray has "form" - in previous events, participants have suffered serious injury including broken bones and that medical issues have been brushed aside when they arose.

The event was not a corporate team-building exercise, but the retreat concept often is; and they almost always involve an outside facilitator.

Whether Ray is guilty or not is not the important point in the context of this article: what is important is the question for HR directors - just how far do we expect our people to go when we send them to such events? If we engage a facilitator to stress them, how far do we want the facilitator to go?

Clearly, no HR director wants his staff coming home dead. The question is how much damage is acceptable. And who is liable if it all goes wrong?

Ray is not even close to unusual in offering a sweat lodge, and a Google search for corporate team building sweat lodge returns more than 26,000 entries.

That suggests that even this, apparently marginal, form of corporate activity is much more widespread than might at first appear.