



LET'S GET PHY



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Management training no longer
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means seminars in self-discovery.
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It's the '90s: Pump up or perish.
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BY ALEX PRUD'HOMME

TARZAN, JANE, AND ESPECIALLY CHEETAH WOULD BE proud of Edwin Neill. In 1988, with poor staff communication and high turnover plaguing his Louisiana beauty-products company, Neill took to the trees. On a three-day excursion to the nearby Four Winds Foundation, the 50-year-old CEO and 18 of his top managers hauled themselves over an 18-foot wall, experienced terror on a trapeze, and hung precariously from 40-foot-high ropes as thick as Johnny Weissmuller's arm—all to exorcise their workplace demons.

Today, with business up 75 percent and turnover near negligible, Neill holds up his company as living proof that such executive monkeyshines can make a difference. "It felt great," he boasts of his bonding experience. "Negotiating the elements takes ingenuity and teamwork. It's about having confidence and taking risks and supporting each other. People broke down a lot of barriers on the ropes course—some of the toughest ones in the office were scared to death up there. Now we're communicating in a whole new way."

Welcome to the new corporate boot camp: the executive retreat. Back in the old days—well, in the 1960s and '70s—companies prepared their managers for battle by holding boardroom seminars on strategic planning or by inviting Peter Drucker in for a chat about restructuring. That's no longer good enough. Leadership, teamwork, risk taking: These are the qualities that help you win in today's guerrilla marketplace. And the best place to acquire these skills, many firms believe, is the great outdoors. So when porcine plutocrats from Texas Air, Frito Lay, Apple Computer, and Levi-Strauss spend precious workdays rock climbing and rope swinging, when gung ho Masters of the Universe orienteer through Georgian forests and raft down Colorado rivers, they're not just in it for kicks.

Nor just for the exercise; not all retreats are so athletic. Broadly defined, an executive retreat is any out-of-office trip on which small groups of corporate folk hone their interactive skills away from the usual distractions. But while some outings are built around nonphysical activities—such as computer games that simulate on-the-job situations—the physical side of management training is by far the hottest today.

It took a while for these strenuous adventures to infiltrate the executive consciousness. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, hip managers swore by mental massaging. They paid huge ransoms to such consulting icons as Tom Peters and Kenneth Blanchard for buttoned-up tuitions on excellence and one-minute managing—or, ironically, to has-been athletes who barely graduated from high school for inspirational speeches on "winning."

CONQUERING FEAR ON THE ROPES AT OUTWARD BOUND.

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Some also went the New Age route. Companies interested in “human potential” or “sensitivity training” confronted their inner selves with groups like the Church of Scientology, MSIA (pronounced “messiah”), and the Pacific Institute. Naturally, car-dealer-turned-est-entrepreneur Werner Erhard also got a piece of the action; his franchised Transformational Technologies, Inc., (TTI) enlightened managers from the Soviet Union, NASA, and the *Fortune* 500 with a brew of Zen, Scientology, and Gestalt.

Then the Sensitive Crowd got slapped around. Some clients found the potentialists, er, platitudinous. “We tried est in the ‘70s,” sniffs Burke Stinson, a spokesman for AT&T in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, “but as a businessperson, you don’t gain much from hearing that Haskins down the hall was molested as a kid.” Others had weightier problems. Firestone settled out of court with an employee fired for refusing to join in a Pacific Institute program. At least two providers, a TTI affiliate near Atlanta and a California group called Psi World, were sued by attendees of company training programs who complained of religious indoctrination and mind control.

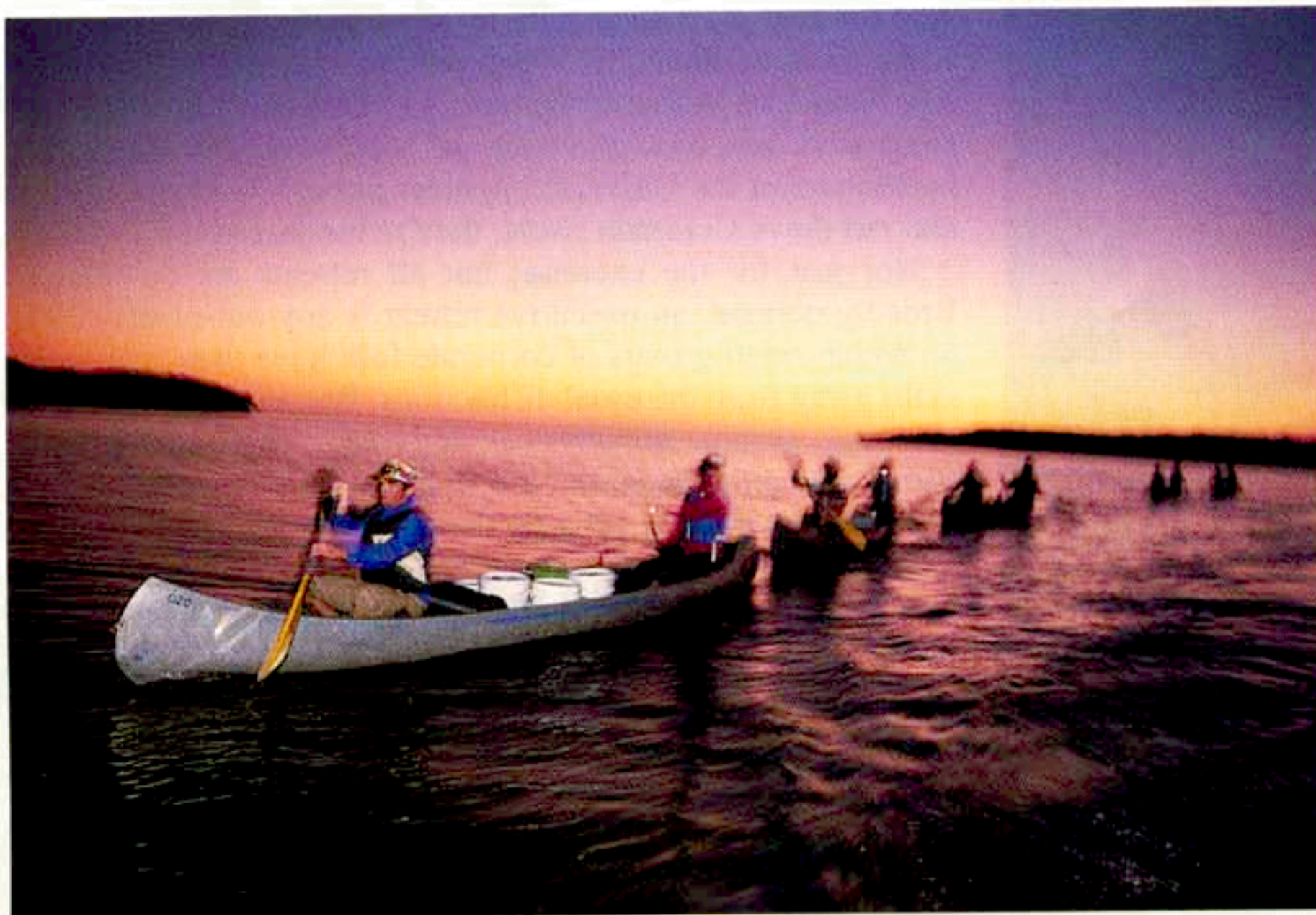
But the most serious blow to spiritual management came during the 1985 “Kroning” of Pacific Bell. California’s largest phone company paid the Eastern mystic Charles Krone \$100 million to train 67,000 employees in efficiency and problem solving. During 10 intense two-day sessions, however, Krone consultants insisted that participants talk and act like Kroners. “Thought police” observed meetings to ensure that Krone procedures were followed, and anyone who objected was said to be a “road block” and led to believe he had no future at the company.irate employees subsequently squawked

to the press. The result was a humiliating series of reports in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, an investigation by the Public Utilities Commission, and an abrupt end to the program. Two years later, Pac Bell’s president, Theodore Saenger, retired early, and its vice president, Lee Cox—who championed the Krone program—was shipped out to the presidency of a small subsidiary.

PARTLY AS A REACTION TO THESE FIASCOS, BUT ALSO because of America’s growing lust for sweat, “experiential learning”—a mostly physical approach to learning by doing—emerged in the 1980s as a popular alternative. It is based on the notion that people learn more working together in an unfamiliar environment—like 70 feet up a tree—than during mind- and seat-numbing lectures in a stuffy meeting room. Most “providers” take their cue from professional development courses pioneered 20 years ago by Outward Bound, the granddaddy of regular-guy adventure travel. CEOs and their underlings trade suits for shorts and T-shirts and embark on team-building jaunts to either the provider’s far-flung facilities or a makeshift installation set up at a nearby conference center or national park.

Each experiential program has its own philosophy, not to mention its own comfort quotient. Outward Bound’s five schools favor an unabashedly Spartan approach. Clients sleep under tarpaulins, eat freeze-dried victuals, and are not allowed to smoke or drink in the wilderness. But other providers promise more Athenian hospitality: Executive Challenge, for one, offers real beds and a mean cuisine on its 800-acre spread 10 miles from Boston. In each case, programs have become increasingly sophisticated and customized; many providers consult extensively with their clients both before and after a retreat, and most sport MBAs on staff who are fluent in Corporatespeak.

Typically, these heuristic retreats seek to make managers more team-oriented and less risk averse. To learn that workplace dangers are often perceived rather than real, clients navigate obstacle courses while blindfolded or cross a narrow wooden bridge over a make-believe “acid river” without falling in. Most voguishly, managers straddle a ropes course of seemingly risky high- and low-altitude “initiatives” that are, in fact, very safe. Clambering up rope ladders, mantling their way around suspended truck tires, tiptoeing across a tension wire strung between trees, and belaying coworkers down to terra firma quickly teaches clients the value of communication. “Going outside the comfort zone—up on the high ropes—



FIVE DAYS CANOEING IN THE FLORIDA EVERGLADES FORGES STRONG TEAM BONDS.

scares a lot of people,” says Jim Kouzes, who “facilitates” a course for Pro Action Associates of Colma, California. “But we have to get used to that. After all, leadership is a risky process, and it requires team support.”

Ideally, when a feckless exec jumps off a Pamper Pole—a 30-foot pole with a wobbly disk on top, so named for its reputed effect on the undergarments—it provides a dramatic metaphor for how he reacts and interacts under pressure at the office. “It worked perfectly for us,” says Susan Studd, organizational development manager for Santa Clara, Califor-

nia’s Intel, who brought a group of highly skeptical engineers to a two-day ropes course run by Seattle’s SportsMind. “On the ‘electric fence’ you were supposed to pass people between two closely spaced ropes without touching either one. We jumped into it too quickly and messed it up. That is exactly what we’d been doing in the marketplace when we introduced a new product. It was a valuable lesson in communication.”

Inspiring new thinking about a changing consumer market was what Tupperware Worldwide was after when it called Utah’s Maxcomm Associates in 1988. Women around the

world were spending less time at home, making the company's mostly door-to-door housewares business more difficult. President Allan Nagle wanted to shake up his troops, so he gathered division heads from 26 countries at a New Orleans conference center and brought in a team from Maxcomm, which supplemented outdoor work on the high ropes with less taxing indoor discussion. "They did a great job of dramatizing the fact that change is constant in our business," Nagle says. "Outside, they'd give us a challenge, we'd figure it out, and then they'd change the rules. Inside, every time we left the meeting room, they'd change the configuration. It got to be quite frustrating, but that's very much what our business is like. People still refer back to that experience."

On the other hand, Visa USA was looking for better staff synergy last year when it hired Pro Action Associates. Over a period of five years, the credit-card company's work force had swelled nearly fivefold—from 280 employees in 1985 to 1,000 in 1989—and with each new hire, its corporate culture changed. Lillian Maremont, Visa's corporate-training manager, worked with Pro Action to set up a team-building workshop in a park near her company's San Francisco headquarters. "The traditional role-playing and feedback sessions that I used to design don't even come close to what we accomplished with this program," she says. In one exercise, participants built a bridge out of two-by-fours. One group took a lot of time planning, and when they got on the bridge, it collapsed. On a second try they weren't listening to one another, and the bridge collapsed again. Then time ran out. "It's just like the mindset in the workplace," Maremont says. "Even when something is obviously wrong, people are not willing to look at things in a different way. It was a very powerful lesson, and I don't think our relationships will ever be the same as a result."

When managers from Nashville's Northern Telecom wanted help communicating with one another, eight from their ranks took a five-day SportsMind course at Fort Worden, a former Army boot camp near Seattle. The group split up and played the "samurai" game, building teamwork through a series of mock-combat exercises. One even had them hurling juice-cans at each other like Ninja death stars. "You learn very quickly what you need to do to support one another," says Darrell Jennings, Northern Telecom's director of training. "The result is that we feel much more empowered to do our jobs, and we work as a much more cohesive team. It's damned expensive—we spent about \$15,000 for the week. But it's worth it, and now my whole management team is going for a session."

THIS SORT OF UNBRIDLED ENTHUSIASM IS TYPICAL OF recent converts to experiential learning. But is it warranted? Do rock climbing and role-playing really whip corporate America into shape? Not necessarily. Clients and critics are taking a look under the rock—and they're finding a few worms.

One problem is the questionable value of management training: There's no guarantee that any given program will work. A week of backpacking in the Great Smoky Mountains may make for good cocktail-party chatter, but as one critic puts it, "You're not necessarily more of a risk taker just because you jump off a pole in the woods." Burke Stinson of AT&T echoes the point: "These programs can be a colossal waste of money if people don't return with new thinking and an expanded ability to take risks. Unless you follow up, the afterglow tends to wear off as soon as the scabs heal."

Furthermore, as in other unregulated industries, some retreat groups are less qualified and less honest than others. Because

there's no licensing, it's hard to tell even how many providers there are today, and there's no way to prevent some experiential educators from peddling New Age snake oil. "A few of these guys are just salesman who overpackage their programs and promise instant cures," says Richard "Rocky" Kimball, who runs a course with Peak Performance in Colorado Springs. "Clients get caught up in the flash, not the substance, and the experiential-learning methodology gets sold short. We are not in business to provide a slick panacea."

Safety is—or should be—a third major concern. Even on the best-run trips, clients can expect an occasional scrape or broken bone, if not worse. Apparently, no one has been killed on an executive retreat, but even some providers admit that incidents like the 1987 death of five ad executives who were white-water rafting (albeit on an informal outing) lurk in the shadows. And what of a bruised psyche? Emil Bohn, a partner with Maxcomm, compares the experiential genre to the Charge of the Light Brigade. "Certain people get so fired up," he says, "that they take huge risks and they fail. The transition back into the world can be tough. Their coworkers or their spouses may not understand what they've been through."

But despite these problems, the best providers are constantly working to improve their programs and meet client needs. Retreats are becoming increasingly holistic. Instead of simply running around playing Mowgli (and giving less thought than intended to producing better widgets than the Japanese), providers are now encouraging clients to relate specific physical challenges to specific workplace problems—and ultimately to the bottom line. Corporations, in turn, are more willing to take chances, literally and figuratively, in order to stay competitive. When companies like AT&T and Federal Express lavish millions on in-house experiential-training courses, it's clear that corporate America takes its boot camp seriously.

If not too seriously. These are, after all, only retreats. One provider recalls a hike through the Rockies that he led for a real estate group. Halfway through the trip, with the group stuck on a ridge and darkness approaching, one manager could no longer carry his pack. The trip leader pointed out that, as in the workplace, this was a team problem. He recalls the CEO mumbling, "Either he picks up that pack or he's outta here." The stricken manager refused to pick it up—and he was subsequently fired. "That CEO thought everything out there related to the office," the provider says. "One thing it did mirror, for sure, is that the CEO is a son of a bitch."