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Ropes Course Builds Communication Skills

By Patricia West-Barker for Finance New Mexico

Unless you are an entrepreneur laboring alone in your garage, your company's success may depend largely on the quality of the team you've assembled to conduct your business—whether that team is made up of two, 20 or 200 people.

To find out what makes high-performing teams tick, MIT's Human Dynamics Laboratory monitored the communications of large numbers of people as they went about their work. The study, published in the *Harvard Business Review* in April 2012, found that "communication plays a critical role in building successful teams." Face-to-face interactions (versus email, phone and text) were extremely important, as were the frequency of non-work related conversations.



Another important finding was that teams can learn to improve the ways they communicate with each other.

One time-tested technique for breaking through old, ineffective habits and opening new lines of communication is a challenge, or ropes, course—a set of outdoor team-building activities that can take place a few feet, or hundreds of feet, above the ground.

The high and low ropes course offered by the Daniels Leadership Center at the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell has been in operation since 2004, and can be combined with a variety of games and classroom activities that can "challenge a group's ability to communicate with each other, follow directions and work together as a team."

While some see ropes courses as an outgrowth of athletic and military training that traces as far back as the Roman Empire, Major Eric Evertson, manager and instructor at NMMI's Yates Leadership Challenge Complex, sees the activity as more closely related to the community-building programs, such as Outward Bound, that flowered in the 1960s.

Originally designed for cadets, NMMI's ropes course can now be customized to meet the needs of any organization that has an outcome it would like to work on. Because the course is attached to the Daniels Leadership Center, Evertson says, programming can be extremely flexible, offering "breakout sessions on a variety of topics that would be complementary to the

experiential, hands-on component, discussing new ideas and actually starting to put those into practice that same day if not that same hour.”

David Markwardt, director of Santa Fe Community College’s Teamwork in Action program, also offers team-building activities — anchored by a high and low ropes challenge course on the college grounds — to both local and international organizations. Like NMML, SFCC’s ropes course can stand on its own or incorporate other kinds of training and can be customized to meet any group’s needs.

Ropes courses are effective because “asking for help, giving support, listening better and trusting more all come into play on a ropes course and all address the most common “ongoing human problems in organizations,” says Markwardt, who also runs Leadership Santa Fe for the Santa Fe Chamber of Commerce. The goal is to get people to “think metaphorically” so they can apply what they learn about success, failure and the way they communicate with each other on the outdoor course to their work.

“Whenever two people cannot have the conversations they need to have,” Markwardt says, “potential performance results fall off. (A ropes course) can shift things. It’s not a panacea, but it can permanently alter relationships in a positive way.”

To arrange a ropes course through New Mexico Military Institute, contact Major Gustavo Garza at garza@nmml.edu. For more information about Teamwork in Action at the Santa Fe Community College, contact David Markwardt at david.markwardt@sfcc.edu.

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