

# CLIMBING TO THE TOP

Ever wondered what happens on a teambuilding and leadership program? **James Holden**, CEO of Leadership Revolution, outlines a recent exercise run for Simplot during their two-day annual conference

**W**hile some of you may not have heard of Simplot, you will certainly have come across their products in the supermarket. They include some of Australia's favourite brands, such as Birds Eye, John West and Leggo's – to name just a few.

Simplot recently asked Leadership Revolution to provide a leadership and teambuilding program to run over two days.

The program kicked off with a powerful keynote speech from legendary mountaineer, Sir Chris Bonington. Within minutes the room was spellbound as Chris weaved his storytelling charm. Delegates were able to draw insights about being entrepreneurial and taking calculated risks.

Participants then headed to the beach to continue the mountaineering theme, with a series of sequenced activities designed to encourage delegates to reflect on the way they approach workplace situations. The group was split into teams.

The first team challenge emphasised the importance of scenario planning, risk management and communication.

At the end of this activity we introduced the teams to our leadership model for creating successful results, which is based on our experience in elite military teams and during our time on expeditions.

## Leadership model

Brief

Plan

Execute

Debrief

As part of the introduction, teams were invited to use the leadership model to conduct a team assessment on how they approached the earlier mission.

Teams recognised that during the briefing phase they had been too quick to engage in the planning stage without ensuring that everyone fully understood what was expected of them. Teams had not seized the opportunity to ask high level questions to



Leadership Revolution facilitators at the end of the brief, which hampered their ability to think outside the square.

## Questions are the answer

During the execution stage, teams found that effective communication was critical to ensure members kept on track.

'Let's go to Plan B' splinter groups developed within some teams as a result of members' ideas not being given sufficient 'air time'. These tense situations proved counter-productive.

Other teams overcame this problem by realising it was better to go back to the drawing board and re-plan than persist with something that is clearly not working.

This exercise aimed to show participants that a conflict of ideas can be an opportunity to create a well-formed approach. It also demonstrated that members should avoid rushing to follow the first suggestion as a means of avoiding conflict within the team.

During the debrief phase, the teams used our EDIL feedback model.

**E** What was **effective/excellent**?

**D** What area requires **development**?

**I** What ideas are there for **improvement**?

**L** What have we **learned from the experience**?

We then reconvened for our communication challenge. Roles and teams changed. Teams were briefed about a mountaineering incident rendering their team snow-blind, bar one. Swift planning and execution were of the essence, given deteriorating weather conditions that could cause the team to perish. This time around, questions were forthcoming and planning time was utilised better.

In the task execution, the person with sight directed the activity, but could not physically assist the others. Clear communication was pivotal to accomplishing this task within the allotted time. Directing numerous personnel simultaneously, being relatively powerless over their actions and the added confusion of other expedition leaders rallying their teams into action proved a challenge for most communicators.

The aim was to teach participants that 'the meaning of your communication is the response you receive, regardless of your intention'.

Teams also considered whether they were losing good ideas during the planning phase as a result of direct communicators offering their opinions and the team immediately accepting them in the absence of any better suggestions. However, indirect communicators tend to be less forthcoming during the brainstorming phase in order to be less confrontational, particularly in multi-cultural groups. Smaller groups may be the solution in these cases.

During the debrief phase, teams were required to ensure the group feedback process used only sensory based observations and that judgmental comments were avoided. Each group then presented a comedy skit relating their experience and learning.

We provided feedback on the spectrum of leadership styles to build awareness. Most teams executed the first task with more of a collaborative leadership style. This task, owing to the urgency of the situation, required the ability to slide along the leadership spectrum towards a more directive leadership style.

### Final day

The next day, teams and roles were again rotated. Teams were briefed on a mountain rescue scenario and then began planning.

Due to simulated mountainous topography, deteriorating weather and cold batteries, some teams were not in radio contact with others. The task therefore required orchestration of relay communication to see the big picture. Teams were thrown when some groups had no casualties whilst others had multiple casualties and insufficient resources.

Teams followed the debrief process and discussed what they had learned. Participants found that while teams had worked well in smaller groups, there was a general lack of leadership and coordination in the larger group's approach to this task. They also noted that coordination and cooperation of team resources and equipment was essential to successfully carrying out the task within the given time. When team members faced obstacles, they needed to stay focused and remain positive in finding workable solutions.

In debriefing the teams, we highlighted that they took on a tactical approach to the group challenge and that more of a strategic approach would have optimised resources and equipment.

Combining all that the group had learned so far, we embarked on the final challenge, our Everest Leadership Challenge: a simulated ascent to the summit of Mount Everest to really hone their leadership skills. Faced with confronting mountaineering situations and multiple 'right answer' scenarios, teams had to make decisions under tight time constraints and while facing multiple tasks.

During this challenge, teams took both a strategic and tactical approach to accomplishing the task.

They learned about the need to influence others and take calculated risks in the decision-making process.

Providing such simulated challenges enabled the group to learn valuable lessons about themselves and their approach to leadership. Learning by recognising what you do well, taking risks and making mistakes in a non-threatening, off-line, non-business consequence environment enabled the team to develop their leadership capability in a way that they can directly apply back to the Simplot business environment. **HC**

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