Kitchen knives and office skills



Companies are always looking for ways to make their employees happy and productive. That is why they go to the trouble and expense of sending them away on training courses. Some courses have a direct connection to work, such as computer training, language skills and time management. Other activities are said to help employees develop so-called 'soft skills', a popular example is team-building. Climbing, canoeing, treasure hunts and sailing are just a few of the ways on offer to get employees together out of the office to discover new things about themselves and one another.

Companies can now forget rope courses and golf outings. The cooking class approach to corporate team-building has caught on and cooking schools across the country are expanding to meet demand. Last year, Hands On Gourmet, a company in San Francisco, tripled the number of chefs it has on call to 33. Cooking by the Book, a company based in New York, did 178 team-building events last year, a 24% increase over the previous year.

'This is a wonderful way to break the ice and get people familiar with each other while getting them to do something as basic as cooking,' said Stephen Gibbs, a co-owner of Hands On Gourmet, whose corporate team-building business in the last year has increased to twenty events a month from an average of twelve. 'Cooking events serve as an equaliser,' Mn Gibbs said, Where the hierarchies of the office do not always translate. In the kitchen, it's not about top-down structure,' he said. 'Everyone is working on the same level.'

Bibby Gignilliat, the owner of Parties That Cook said the change of scenery makes people see their colleagues in a different light. 'It breaks down your stereotype of people in the office,' Ms Gignilliat said. 'You might not especially like someone you work with, but suddenly you're working on a recipe with them and you see they're a really good cook.' This is true of other team-bonding pursuits, of course.

And fortunately most people are willing to give cooking a try, as the minimal level of competence in the kitchen is relatively low. What's more, the kitchen can represent a microcosm of the working world, with a deadline, limited resources to work with and a requirement for cooperation. Ms Gignilliat said that unlike the corporate world, where co-workers might be collaborating on a project for a year, in the cooking class 'they can see results after an hour.'

Some of the most gratifying results can come from a cooking event with people who barely know one another, she's sure of that. Ms Gignilliat said she started doing cuisine-centred team-building eight years ago, when 40 or so executives arrived in San Francisco from Asia to negotiate a deal. The local law firm they were working with set up a team-building class with Ms Gignilliat at the home of one of the lawyers. Ms Gignilliat was sceptical at first. 'I walked into the living room and they were standing in a circle, very formally, and no one was talking,' she recalled. She tried to break the silence with a cheerful, 'OK! Who wants to cook?' No response.

Once she managed to get the men to the kitchen and into aprons, she showed them how to make stuffed chicken and strawberry cheesecake. 'By the end of the night, everyone was having fun,' she recalled. Ms Gignilliat heard later that her class had been the highlight of the group's two-week stay in San Francisco. 'That's when I knew I was on to something,' she said 'Food is a universal language and nothing brings people together better than creating a meal.'

1 According to the first paragraph, team-building courses are

A held in the place where people work.

B too expensive for companies.

C organised outside the place of work.

D directly related to the world of business.

2 What does the phrase 'caught on' in paragraph 2 mean?

A became popular or fashionable

B starred to understand something

C tried to get people involved

D got better and reached a certain standard

3 Stephen Gibbs believes that

A cooking is a good example of a hierarchical activity.

B cooking together reduces the differences in people's status.

C people who give orders at work are also leaders in the kitchen.

D everyone has to do an equal amount of work when cooking.

4 In paragraph 4, Bibby Gignilliat says that cooking classes help people to

A become better, more confident cooks

B learn new ways of preparing food from each other.

C change their attitude to their colleagues.

D form better relationships than other team-building courses.

5 In paragraph 5, what does Ms Gignilliat say is an advantage of cooking courses?

A There aren't the same pressures as in normal working life.

B People quickly develop a high level of competence in the kitchen.

C People remember the projects years after they finish the course.

D People get the satisfaction of seeing results in a short time.

6 In paragraph 6, Ms Gignilliat states that the course often works best with

A people who don't know each other well.

B large groups of executives from different countries.

C people who regularly work together on projects.

D people who know each other well.

7 When she arrived for her first cooking course, she found the participants

A responded immediately to her enthusiasm.

B looked nervous and unsure when she entered the room.

C seemed serious and uncommunicative.

D appeared to be happy and relaxed.

8 What did Ms Gignilliat discover after her first cooking course?

A The group wanted to repeat the experience.

B It worked well as a team-building activity.

C The menu she selected was a popular choice.

D There was a demand for longer courses.