



THE SOUND OF TEAMWORK

His staff members may be unaware of it, but the ultra intense senior vice president just might have the pipes of Harry Connick Jr. or the soul of Sam Cooke.

A team building exercise focused on creative innovation gives organizations a chance to belt out their best melodies.

Song Division takes employees out of the office and onto the stage. Team members write and perform their own music with the aid of professional musicians in an actual recording studio. The concept began in Australia and is being expanded to the United States.

Employees are broken into groups of 10. Teams are given a topic to write a song about. The final composition must be an original. No borrowed riffs or samples lyrics are permitted.

"It's not karaoke," says Andy Sharpe, founder of Song Division.

"You don't cover a song or replace the words to Hotel California. It's about the creative process."

Based in Australia, the company has worked with U.S. organizations and is launching a New York office this year. Sharpe, a former IBM worker and musician, created the business that caters to organizations seeking to enliven the creativity energy inside an office.

Taking a page from the musical contest shows that have consumed television programming, a judging competition is held by peers in the organization. When the winning song is selected, the entire team gets on stage to sing the song together. What begins as a competition ends as a unifying event. The company's Spinal Tap experience is complete with a "rockumentary" that captures footage of all teams on a DVD.

Few if any employees are likely to walk out of the studio with a record contract, but team members gain a greater sense of accomplishment.

"They come to us because of a serious issue," Sharpe says. "When they walk out, they say, 'I could hear that on the radio.' You're not going to hear it on the radio, but you get a beautifully produced song, and the group achieved something as a group that they didn't think they could achieve."

Staff members at Pricewaterhouse Coopers were among the first U.S.-based employees to break out into song. Employees with Coca-Cola in Australia were undergoing a difficult merger between departments and decided to capture their frustrations in lyrics. The final product resembled a Johnny Cash song where the protagonist finds his new companion to be less than ideal.

The entire program lasts three hours. A group of 25 employees would cost roughly \$9,000. Sharpe uses the famed Skyline Studios in New York where luminaries such as Frank Sinatra, Miles Davis, Eric Clapton, and Madonna have recorded music.

As the novelty of rope climbing and bungee jumping has worn off, many team building exercises are viewed skeptically by workplace consultants who dismiss them as gimmicks that provide a few hours of escape without any measurable change in the office climate when everyone returns.

What makes the Song Division event unique, in Sharpe's view, is the opportunity for conversations among staff members at all levels. An administrative level staff member can discuss his musical tastes with an executive in an appropriate setting. As he points out, many people are uncomfortable playing golf or participating in a physical activity.

"We're not going to double a company's profit or stop them from going into insolvency," Sharpe says. "We can be a valuable tool used to maintain or improve creativity. A lot of blue chip companies place a premium on retaining high value employees."

Michael Laff