Bicycle-building Puts a New Spin on Team-Building for [Business Unit] Colleagues

When more than four dozen colleagues from ABC's [Business Unit] travelled to their annual meeting in Chicago last April, few realized the special role they were about to play in the lives of some very lucky children. But mid-way through the weeklong meeting, the colleagues found themselves in a tight race to assemble and accessorize seven gleaming bicycles. And then, to everyone's surprise and delight, they got to personally hand off those bikes to seven beaming children.

The afternoon event was designed as a team-building exercise. Teams comprising colleagues from different geographic locations and functions competed to see which could correctly assemble a bicycle the fastest. (The assembly wasn't "from scratch;" bikes arrived on the scene in parts, the way they might arrive from the store.) An onsite mechanic carefully checked out each completed bicycle for accurate assembly and safety. Teams had three chances to get it right before losing points, and many found, to their chagrin, that they needed all three chances.

Each team also decorated a mechanic's coverall, made team signs and posters, and prepared a brief team presentation. "It did take a lot of teamwork. We had to work together and also coordinate several activities at once," explained participant Patrick F., [title]. "While one group was putting the bike together, there was another group working on our presentation and another working on our coverall."

As it turned out, assembling the bikes was only the beginning. The next step was to accessorize, which wasn't as easy as grabbing a basket or a bell. Teams competed for accessories in contests ranging from trivia to a relay obstacle course race, taking turns with the team bike and coverall.

"The rider would come back and flop down on the floor and we'd just rip the coverall off for the next person. It was wild," said Teresa H, [title], who not only participated in the event but helped with its planning.

Finally, bicycles assembled and accessorized, an administrator from the local Boys and Girls Club arrived to thank the colleagues. She explained the mission of the club and how children had been selected to receive the bikes—all were special achievers in some area such as leadership or academics. Then came the biggest surprise of all. "We have some guests," she announced. With that, a door was opened and in trooped seven school-aged children. The faces of the youngsters shone when they saw the bikes, and within minutes the room was filled with shouting and laughing, as children raced about, trying on their new helmets, ringing the bells, and hopping on for a test ride. The colleagues were thrilled.

"It was so rewarding," said H. "One boy kept saying, 'It's mine? It's really mine?'"

Team-Building Meets Community-Building

Mike W, [title], explained that the seed for the bicycle project was planted two years ago, when the group held its annual meeting in New Orleans: "We purposefully held it there, because we felt it would be good to find a way to give back in that community. We ended up helping out at the humane society, cleaning cages and walking dogs," he explained. The event proved very popular with colleagues, who requested that community service be a part of team-building activities at future meetings as well.

Assembling the bicycles—and delivering them into the hands of their delighted new owners—was even more of a hit. Participants say it provided all the essential elements of team-building, but with one important difference. Patrick F. puts it this way:

"So often corporate events like this are nice for the moment, then you quickly forget about them. This kind of thing lives on. It was just great to be able to do something that had an impact on people in a real way."