

ADVENTURES IN TEAM BUILDING

The Outdoor Wilderness Leadership School.

BY ELIZABETH QUINN

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, problem solving initiatives, and team building have become the foundation of modern corporate retreats, but the various ways in which these themes are addressed and activated have become so diversified, the creation and enhancement of these experiences has become its own industry.

The Outdoor Wilderness Leadership School (OWLS) is one company whose primary objective is to provide corporations with the framework for a personalized opportunity for both individual and team growth. Initially founded as an adventure recreation center based out of the Wintergreen Resort in Virginia, OWLS now acts as both a corporate and adventure learning program provider, serving clients at luxury facilities across the country. Its central offices in Bozeman, Montana, and Wintergreen, Virginia, allow access to the Gallatin Mountain Range, Yellowstone Park, the Blue Ridge Mountains, and the Chesapeake Bay.

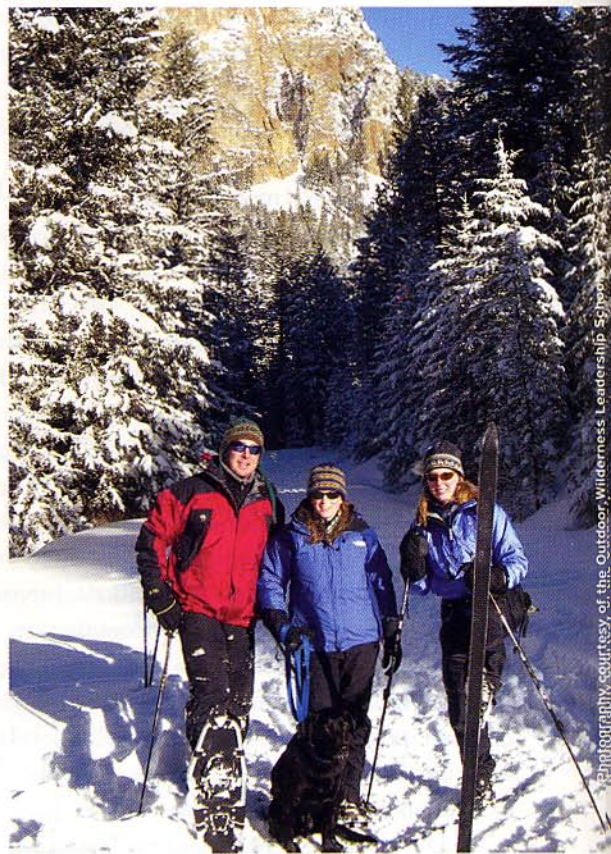
OWLS is divided into two schools in order to service both corporate and individual clients. Companies interested in team building, management training, or behavioral consulting work with the Corporate Learning Center (CLC) which designs programs that provide instruction specific to the needs of the group. Prospective clients to the CLC complete a questionnaire that examines goals, objectives, and physical ability. From this analysis and OWLS' independent research of the company, the CLC develops a customized retreat to address the client's specific needs. In the past, OWLS has worked with such organizations as Phillip Morris International, Capital One, Merck, and Pfizer.

Eric Henyon, director of the Montana office, has worked with many different clients and has observed a few recurring problems. "Every group has problems with communication. That is one skill we really try and focus on." He also cites poor job

matching as being a problem for many companies. "We see a lot of good people put in the wrong job," he says. "We try to explore people's strengths and recognize an individual's potential."

Working in partnership with several resorts, OWLS has the ability to employ traditional team building tools such as high and low ropes and ground initiatives (activities that present a specific problem a group has to work together to solve). One such activity, "Channels," is a ground initiative in which a team has to construct a pathway for transporting marbles into a series of buckets using PVC pipe and limited tools.

The Homestead in Hot Springs, Virginia, which is used only by OWLS facilitators and clientele, houses the largest ropes course on the East Coast, which can accommodate approx-



Right: A backcountry travel leadership course at Paradise Valley in Bozeman, Montana.

imately 200 people. Off-the-ground challenges create an environment in which co-workers are connected through a series of ropes that makes them physically dependent on one another, which leads to emotional support and cohesion. The rationale behind these activities is that, by working through these elements, participants recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of their co-workers, and experience the dynamic of their group in an intimate outdoor environment.

In addition to these initiatives, OWLS offers several team activation programs. Groups can participate in GPS orienteering courses that send participants on missions through the Rockies, Smokies, or Florida Everglades. Using hand-held navigational devices to maneuver

Below: A leadership journey through the Ojito Wilderness Study Area in New Mexico.

through unfamiliar terrain, communication, cooperation, and

cohesion emerge as important themes.

In both a wagon-building contest and cardboard regatta, groups are divided into teams that compete for resources, strategize the design of their craft, execute their plan, then race their product against that of their opposition. Emphasizing creativity, diligence, and resourcefulness, these activities present a specific goal and challenge parties to meet these objectives using limited materials and restrictive time constraints.

For a more recreational experience, OWLS can outfit groups that prefer to incorporate "adventure learning" into their retreat. Fly-fishing in Virginia's renowned trout streams at the Boar's Head Inn; kayaking on Lake Monocan at the Wintergreen Resort; rock climbing at Gallatin Towers and Hylite Canyon in Montana; rafting down the Yellowstone River near the Big Sky Resort; and mountain biking through the George Washington National Forest are just a few of the activities offered.

"We look at this as an investment for our clients, not just fun and recreation," Henyon says about the goals of the program. "They need to walk away a stronger, more unified team." ✦

DETAILS

Virginia, 434-325-8166
Montana, 406-920-2800
www.owlsadventures.com

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