

Adventurous pursuits can build character

Teaching confidence-building techniques, leadership skills and teamwork can be a daunting task when confined to the classroom or office. However, outbound training - which focuses on using experimental learning to help people build character and team spirit - may be the answer.

Fong Fu-kai, director of administration at Kids Experimental Learning, said experimental learning involved people participating in activities and learning through personal experience to help develop confidence, teamwork skills, problem-solving skills and, more importantly, character.

Mr Fong said: "In the 1980s, people began to learn that outbound training was a great way to enhance their ability and confidence. These days, people look at an outbound training programme from a more serious perspective rather than an activity for children at a camp where they spend time just to have fun."

According to Mr Fong, more than half of the outbound training participants are primary and secondary school students and the peak seasons are in March and April after the Lunar New Year holidays, and June and July when final exams are finished.

Clients subscribing to the service also include companies that want to promote co-operation and understanding between staff members. Mr Fong said human resources managers sought his firm's help for ways to enhance their staff's sense of belonging to the company.

Expenses for outbound training programmes are charged according to venue, content of activities, number of trainers required and any special services involved.

Mr Fong said: "Some activities may involve a lot of equipment and professional staff. For example, rock-climbing requires a specially built wall, a qualified instructor and belayers to ensure safety.

"Extra services such as transportation arrangement for participants and insurance coverage are also part of the cost."

Joe Yau Man-lam, professional and growth officer at the Hong Kong Institute of Adventure Counselling, one of the first organisations in Hong Kong to provide outbound training, said: "Outbound training activities in Hong Kong are becoming more focused on personal challenge instead of personal growth. Outbound activities have become more intense and challenging, but this does not necessarily produce better results."

Mr Fong said participants may have very different views and feelings after they have completed the training.

Some people may discover new things about themselves, while others may think of it as a game, he said.

With more and more people recognising the value of outbound training activities, the number of players entering this business has increased, making competition fierce.

In Hong Kong both non-profitable organisations and commercial companies provide and organise outbound training.

"Commercial companies find it hard to compete against non-profitable organisations in terms of course fees," said Mr Fong, adding that the only way for commercial companies to compete with non-profitable organisations was to provide more professional and higher quality services.

In Mr Yau's opinion, Hong Kong's outbound training was affected by the "fast-food culture" where most schools and companies tend to focus on organising a one-day camp.

"Clients are too eager to get results within a short time which is not possible. Participants may think that they will become a whole new person after a one-day camp.

"In the United States, outbound training programmes can last over a year but in Hong Kong a two-night or three-night camp is considered already too long," Mr Yau said.

"Only repetitive training and reinforcement are able to produce long-term change, and that takes time."

But whatever the objectives schools or companies have when they organise outbound training activities for

their students or staff, demand for people with professional training and qualifications in the field is on the rise.

Mr Yau agreed that competition in the industry was getting more fierce and professional recognition of qualified trainers and coaches in this field had become paramount.

"The University of Hong Kong's School of Professional and Continuing Education offers a foundation certificate in adventure-based education for teachers and social workers with a degree and relevant working experience.

"There is also a two-year training course offered to secondary students to give them a chance to obtain a professional qualification in the industry," Mr Yau said.

Jargon

- **Debriefing** a gathering conducted after an activity to explain to the participants the purpose of the activity and allowing them to share experiences and feelings
 - **Experimental learning** learning by conducting activities and through personal experience
 - **Belayer** a person who is in charge of the safety of a rock-climber while he/she is climbing
 - **Adventure-based counselling** refers to a group-based, adventure-based approach to personal development and therapeutic activity
-

Key players

- Operation director
 - Manager
 - School teacher
 - Social worker
 - Training officer
-

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK: Safety first

Calvin Lee Ka-fai, training officer at the Hong Kong Institute of Adventure Counselling, is tasked to boost team spirit and enhance people's confidence through experimental learning activities

I have been working in outbound training for more than 15 years. I joined in 2000 to help promote outbound training. At the Institute, I do not have designated working hours and have quite a lot of outdoor work to do, but basically my duties are in two main areas - office work and on-site training.

Every day after I get to the office I have to answer e-mails. Most of them are inquiries from schools or companies that show interest in our services, and some are from other outbound trainers or personnel in the same line of work asking me questions or sharing information.

After that, I go on the internet to read the latest news and development of the industry. Compared to places, such as the United States, Hong Kong's outbound training trails behind, so surfing the Net for information is the best way to get the latest information in the field.

Part of my job is to prepare and produce lecture materials based on the cases I find on the internet. In the evenings from 7pm to 10pm, I lecture to people who want to become outbound trainers.

I also need to handle administration work such as handling completed application forms from participants of training courses. I usually look out for missing information and I have to decide which applicants are eligible to participate in the different activities.

When a school or a firm comes to us for help I meet with them and plan activities according to their objectives such as team building or staff confidence enhancement. After screening out applicants who are not eligible because of physical or other reasons, I make preparations and plan activities for the training.

Before hosting an outbound training activity, I have a great deal of work to do including booking a venue,

preparing transport for the participants, selecting appropriate equipment, ordering food and obtaining insurance for the participants. I am also in charge of maintaining equipment. I have to repair damaged equipment and make sure it is in good condition. On the site there may be other equipment that people can borrow or rent. I have to ensure that they are all in good working condition before use.

Outbound activities are usually held on the weekends at campsites far away from the city so I don't really have designated holidays. Ensuring the safety of participants is one of my major responsibilities. I inform the police station nearest the camp site about things such as the venue and duration of the training. I also plan the shortest route to the nearest hospital in case of emergencies.

On the day the training takes place, I have to give a lecture to the participants. At the beginning of the first activity I usually arrange an ice-breaking exercise to motivate the participants and build up their spirits. Then there are some warm-up exercises providing the participants with a chance to get to know other people and communicate with each other. After that the main activities will begin.

Participants are required to complete a series of group tasks and running bases. At the end there will be a debriefing which is the most important component. At debriefing I explain to the participants the purpose and importance of the activities that they have completed and encourage them to think about what they have learnt. This is followed by all participants sharing their feelings about the activities.