

## Executives build teams onboard battleship

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**The Team Builders Plus team-building workshop on the USS New Jersey in May.**

CAMDEN -- On a windy May morning on the deck of the [USS New Jersey](#) battleship, for 25 Delaware Valley employees, it was 1944 again.

Clad in sailors' caps, the business professionals gathered aboard the warship to re-enact the role of Navy Special Forces operatives preparing for a World War II-style invasion of an uncharted island in the Pacific Ocean. Their mission: prepare the beaches and dismantle the enemy's communication towers.

However, the operatives involved in the simulation, dubbed Battleship Adventure, weren't being judged on their military prowess that day, but on their teamwork and communication skills.

The fast-paced workshop, designed to show the benefits of collaboration in the workplace, was developed and organized by [Team Builders Plus](#), a Cherry Hill-based company that conducts performance coaching and leadership training for organizations worldwide.



**Participants map out their mission.**

"If an organization can't communicate, it can't be effective," Team Builders Plus President Jeffrey Backal said. "Now, more and more companies are realizing the importance of teamwork -- stress is lowered, morale is boosted and inevitably, so is productivity."

The May 23 preview of Battleship Adventure was a showcase for the new program and its partnership with the USS New Jersey battleship, a decorated former battleship that is now a floating museum on the Camden waterfront. The participants, representing companies from across the region including Advanta Corp., the [Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts](#) and the Campbell's Soup Co., volunteered to undergo the trial run and complete 20 different tasks, including cracking the enemy code and discovering the secret mole, to successfully complete the mission.

This time, the participants succeeded, something not always guaranteed, just like in the real world, Backal said. After the program, the volunteers discussed the problems, the obstacles and potential improvements.

"It needs to be fun, but also generate results," Backal added. "If there is no change in behavior, it's just a day of fun."

Ed Garrison, director of leadership services and employee engagement at International Paper in Memphis, Tenn., traveled all the way to Camden to participate.

Now, Garrison said, he is considering a similar workshop for his company.

"It's simple -- collaboration builds better results," he said.

Other participants agreed they saw parallels between the battle in the Pacific and battles in the workplace.

Christine Cummings, leadership and professional development manager at PHH Mortgage in Mount Laurel, said it was easier to focus on teamwork away from the everyday distractions at work.

"Even when you think you know how crucial [communication] is, you get caught up in your day-to-day tasks and forget," she said.

The mission, punctuated with excited cries and motivational speeches, engaged all participants on deck that day -- precisely the motive behind this unorthodox approach, said Ken Blackwell, Team Builders Plus' senior executive consultant.

"You could sit and listen to someone speak, but that's dull," Blackwell said. "The key is engagement. Plus, we are right here on the water, not stuck in a stuffy room."

Backal and co-founder Merrick Rosenberg, director of training and development, didn't anticipate such success when they met at Drexel University while earning their MBAs in 1990, but they were confident their innovative approach to interoffice teamwork would attract corporate clients.

They were right. Since founding the company in 1991, they've earned the business of more than 25 percent of the current Fortune 100 companies, according to the company, including AT&T, Commerce Bank, Ford Motor Co., Peco Energy Co. and PepsiCo.

They've added 30 new clients worldwide in the first half of this year, including nine New Jersey companies and eight Pennsylvania companies, with five in Philadelphia. They declined to give revenue figures.

Like many of their programs, Battleship Adventure was designed from scratch and tailored to the individual needs of each company after research into their strengths and weaknesses, Backal said, adding that Team Builders Plus also schedules programs lasting eight to 12 months.

"There are so many issues that arise when a company grows quickly," he said. "When a small company becomes a large company, how do all those departments communicate?"

Generally, the cost of Team Builders Plus programs ranges from \$1,800 to several thousand dollars, depending on the number of participants and the length of the event, he said.

Since May, Team Builders Plus has hosted two more simulations of Battleship Adventure, one for L'Oreal and one for Ikea.

L'Oreal, based in New York, has been a client since 2002. The beauty care company opened a location in Burlington County last November and as a result, a lot of their new employees worked overtime throughout the winter, said Antoinette Mikulewicz, a L'Oreal human resources manager. After the stress of the opening subsided, about 20 employees from L'Oreal boarded the USS New Jersey to evaluate their progress as a team and see where they could improve.

Weeks later, Mikulewicz said, employees were still raving about the program.

"In speaking to the management team, I've heard [the employees] have been a little more positive, they are smiling more, and even the management team is," she said. "They really took to heart some of the lessons that came out of that program."

L'Oreal continues to work with Team Builders Plus, she added, not only because the employees enjoy it, but because it's an engaging way of imparting crucial lessons that stick.

Rosenberg sees it another way.

"One thing separates high-performance companies from others -- members who care about each other's personal growth and success," he said. "As soon as you start thinking, we are on the same team, you start to achieve objectives."

For more information call 856-596-4196 or visit [http://www.teambuildersplus.com/battleship\\_adventure.html](http://www.teambuildersplus.com/battleship_adventure.html).