



*What do you get when you cross
boot camp, kindergarten, and some
god-awful eighth-grade acting workshop?
A personal-growth experience.*



Revival of THE FITTEST

On a clear, crisp spring day, when the ocean wind comes whipping off the water and the afternoon sunlight splashes dizzily off the waves, you can't help but think that in the right kind of light just about any body of water looks pretty—even sludge-filled Boston Harbor.

It's a day to ease the nerves and clear the sinuses. A day for taking it all in. Out here in the middle of the Harbor, on Thompson Island, a group of men and women are doing just that. They are roaming the island at a loose, leisurely pace, following the lead of a young woman named Cindy. She is a blonde, blue-jeaned young woman with earthy-pretty looks and an air of competence. She walks ahead issuing polite, casual orders as the group winds its way through the woods.

The men and women are all managers from various Bradlees stores, gathered here from across the East Coast for a four-day workshop at Thompson Island's Outward Bound center. Bradlees's parent company, Stop & Shop, has sent them all out here to attend an outdoor team-building program designed to boost their confidence and improve their leadership skills.

It sounds like a nice enough junket: paid time off to come out to this secluded little island for a few days of fresh air and sunshine at the company's expense. More seemly than the three-martini lunch, more wholesome than a big-city corporate convention—as white-collar freebies go, it's an attractive one. The companies who send their employees here claim that all this woodland roustabouting builds better, more confident managers, and that in the long run the lost time at the office will pay off in intangible benefits like competence and a strong team ethic.

Of course, the problem rests with that word intangible. It's hard to measure the human spirit; hard for Stop & Shop, in this case, to find out whether it's getting its motivational money's worth. But in productivity-crazed America these days, companies will try almost anything.

The back-to-nature business is booming. A growing number of organizations, many Fortune 500 companies among them, are sending their top brass out for week-long wilderness leadership labs in the mountains, the deserts and on the high seas.

In the last few years, Outward Bound and a host of competitors (the most notable local comer being Executive Challenge of Peterborough, New Hampshire) have been bending over backwards to tap into the lucrative corporate-development market.

Last year Outward Bound took some 3500 executives into the great outdoors—marking a full 100 percent increase in the past five years. Although Outward Bound's first executive outings started more than ten years ago, only in recent years has this part of its business really caught on.

"Business leaders are starting to realize that manage-



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ment by influence can often work better than the traditional old management by authority," says Bob Gordon, coordinator of the professional-development program at Outward Bound's Hurricane Island school in Maine (with which Boston's Thompson Island program is affiliated). Gordon says that shifting sensibilities in the larger corporate psyche (which have resulted in part from the American economy's transition from manufacturing to service-based industries) have whetted many managers' tastes for new thinking. "I think that in the next decade American companies are going to be increasingly in the market for new approaches to internal development," he says. "And that's where we hope to come in."

The idea is hardly a new one. Great thinkers through the centuries have sung the virtues of fresh air and honest work outdoors. Tolstoy, for one, insisted on working outdoors as an essential, cathartic component to any full life. John Ruskin, the estimable critic and social pundit during Victorian times, would regularly send his Oxford students out of their classrooms for an afternoon's hard work alongside the local farmers.

Given some of the fouler humors said to be afflicting the American corporate body today—sluggishness, greed and a

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lack of innovation—Outward Bound may offer a particularly useful sort of therapy. What better tonic for those ills than a good healthy dose of outdoorsmanship—not to mention a little fresh island air?

But viewed from up close, it all looks not so much idyllic as, well, silly. These managers from the Bradlees group—grown men and women, mind you—are trying to balance each other on a giant rickety wooden seesaw. The hodgepodge group—young, old, middle-aged, some eight or ten of them in all bunched together in a long fleshy tangle across this great creaking piece of timber . . . Just watch them, wobbling up and down on the beam, back and forth, trying to get the balance just right, all the while bickering and pawing at each other like

a bunch of outsized eight-year-olds. "No!" someone shouts. "No, no, no. Listen to me. Listen! This is what we do: We put all the heavyweights in the middle, then everyone stand still and listen to me . . ." "No, no. Wait, wait, wait," someone interrupts. "I know what to do. I know. Listen, listen. All stand still, let me move back and . . . Boom. Everyone tumbles off the beam. Some of them laugh it off; others get up scowling. A quiet, middle-aged woman smiles gently at Cindy and rolls her eyes, mock-pleading; Cindy offers no help, just smiles back and nods them on to try again. They pick themselves up, brush off the dirt and give it another try. It takes forever.

After several more attempts, after considerable grunting and shuffling and high-pitched squabbling, they somehow manage to do it. There they are, barely balancing each other across this teetering piece of wood. They manage to stay balanced for all of ten seconds before the beam tilts back to the ground. But somehow they've done it. And they're ecstatic now, laughing, kidding and exchanging spirited high-fives.

All afternoon the group has been cavorting around the island like this. Climbing over walls, practicing "true falls," crossing imaginary rivers on wooden rafts, fiddling about with assorted ropes, tires and blocks of wood. It's like a cross between boot camp, kindergarten and some god-awful eighth-grade acting workshop.

It looks hokey, but you can't help but see that there's something to it.

"Out here you learn that teamwork means everything," observes Linda Dodge, the manager at Bradlees's Chicopee store, after completing the day's program. "You really learn how crucial it is to communicate with people and what it really means to listen."

"I admit I was a little leery coming into this," says Mel Frankel, another Thompson Island participant, who manages the Bradlees in Fall River. "But right away you start learning how to listen, how to use the talent that's available and make it into a good cohesive team."

Teamwork, goal-setting, "personal empowerment"—these are the kind of words you tend to hear on the island. The language of self-help. It may sound hackneyed in the abstract, the stuff of too much Carnegie-style self-improvementism; but to watch one of these groups on the island, confronting actual physical problems and solving them together, by thinking them out, by speaking up and by doing whatever it is that needs doing . . . well, it puts you in mind of some of the more basic truths of survival and of the practical necessity of social systems.

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The notion that people can achieve more as part of a team than they can by themselves, that life's more basic challenges are best confronted with a little help—this is the hard philosophical nut on which Outward Bound's curriculum turns. Just beneath the tense surface of physical challenge and perceived risk lies the comforting (if unspoken) assurance that somehow all the problems can be solved—that someone will be there to catch you—and that somehow all the answers, if you look hard enough, will be out there for the finding.

The key to each exercise is a single perceived risk—whether in the form of physical danger or the simple possibility of failure—a risk that, once eluded, sweetens the shared feeling of success that binds a group together.

Outward Bound in this country was founded as an outdoor-excursion program for adolescent boys. Back in 1962, the idea was to take a bunch of schoolboys away from their comfortable suburban homes for a few weeks, have them trudge out into the wilderness, and show them a thing or two about survival and cooperation. Confront them with physical and intellectual challenges. Let them learn to

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drop their guards and work things out together, to cast their lot with the group. Throw in a little risk, or at least a perception of risk, and let them show their stuff.

"Life-enhancing experience is obtained through the seas, the mountains, the wild lake country, the desert," wrote the program's founder, Joshua Miner, a former teacher at Phillips Academy, who modeled it after the highly successful European program of the same name. Miner envisioned a program predicated on "an intense experience surmounting challenges in a natural setting, through which the individual builds his sense of self-worth, the group comes to a heightened awareness of human interdependence, and all grow in concern for those in danger and in need."

It sounded pretty good—and not only that, it seemed to work. Good testimonials poured in from the start. Young men claimed to have "found themselves" in the wilderness, proud fathers beamed, and Outward Bound built a reputation for building character and hearty virtue at a reasonable price.

The lessons of cooperation, teamwork and confidence-building soon proved marketable to other chunks of the American populace. By the early 1970s, Outward Bound was offering regular outings for adults, including women-only and coed programs, as well as tuition-free, subsidized expeditions for special-needs groups, such as underprivileged inner-city kids, emotionally disturbed teens and juvenile delinquents.

Only in recent years has Outward Bound started setting its sights on the big corporate game. The first executive outing started running in 1979, but only in the last few years has Outward Bound started on-site management consulting.

Often an Outward Bound guide will spend up to a week on location with a company before embarking on the trip, getting to know the participants and acting as a consultant. Typically, a guide will move right in to the company headquarters, take a seat alongside the top

**"BY THE TIME I'M OLD ENOUGH TO
HAVE HEART DISEASE, THERE'LL BE A CURE."**

—Joanne Meeks, 1950–1988



Sure, it's possible that someday heart disease will be as easy to fix as a broken fuel pump. And you won't have to worry about prevention. But would you bet your life on it?



American Heart Association WERE FIGHTING FOR YOUR LIFE

executives, look over some relevant facts and figures, interview each of the participants, and call meetings to suggest various tacks for approaching whatever problems the company may have.

For example, let's say a CEO is worried that business has been growing too quickly of late and that certain channels of communication have suffered as a result. In such a scenario, Outward Bound might suggest taking a horizontal cross-section of managers from several departments and sending them out into the wilderness for a week, giving them exercises designed specifically to make them communicate. One such exercise might be the so-called blind maze, in which all the members of the group are blindfolded, split into two smaller groups and set at opposite ends of a giant labyrinth constructed entirely of string. The groups are charged with guiding each other toward each other, and then past, to the opposite ends of the maze, using only verbal instructions. After finishing the exercise, they are told to "debrief" each other to discuss how they solved the problems and share suggestions as to how they might have done better.

Let's take another common scenario. Say an organization wants to nudge its middle managers into assuming more responsibility. Once the group has struck out for the wilderness, the Outward Bound guides might assign each manager to take turns leading the expedition—captaining a sailboat on the ocean, for instance, or mapping out and leading a day's hiking expedition across the Maine foothills.

The Thompson Island program curriculum is less rigorous than the one provided by the Hurricane Island school, which offers cliff rappelling, overnight sailing trips or food-foraging expeditions to deserted Maine islands.

The big companies —GE, Pepsi, L.L. Bean—keep coming back for more.

Visitors to Thompson stay in comfortable dormitories on the island and enjoy personal free time at night.

"It all centers on a very basic form of group-dynamic theory," says Margaret Williams, director of marketing at Thompson Island. Williams holds a master's degree in organizational development from Yale. "Outward Bound forces the individual to evaluate his re-



Bradlees department store managers on a see-saw: "We tend to deal in the intangibles."

lationship to the group at a fundamental level," she says, "and it forces the group as a whole to coalesce in a very real, physical way. That kind of bonding is invaluable in any organization." Williams concedes that Outward Bound can still be a tough sell to many conservative, bottom-line-minded CEOs. "A lot of managers naturally tend to look for hard, quantifiable results," she says. "But out here we tend to deal in the intangibles."

The most recent addition to Outward Bound's corporate curriculum is the more personally oriented Professional Renewal program. Unlike most other versions of the Outward Bound program, this one emphasizes personal achievement over group bonding. The Renewal program is geared particularly toward individual executives looking to boost their self-confidence and marketability.

The program is tailor-made for job changers and displaced executives (of which there's certainly no shortage of late) looking to regain their confidence after losing their jobs. "It can be a tremendously empowering experience for someone facing a change in his or her professional life," says Gordon. "We try to help people explore various approaches to balancing their personal, professional and spiritual priorities."

Professional Renewal is only in its second year and remains very much in the formative stage. Outward Bound is experimenting with different approaches to marketing the program: of-

fering group rates through professional headhunting firms, arranging for companies to cover the cost of the program under their tuition-reimbursement programs, and relying on word of mouth. (The Professional Renewal program costs \$875 per person for a five-day program; the group-contract rates vary.)

It's too early to say how well the Renewal program will catch on. But Outward Bound can afford to experiment; the cash-cow group-contract programs have kept things comfortably in the black for the last few years, accounting for a major chunk of Hurricane Island's \$9 million total annual business.

Whatever it is that Outward Bound is doing for these managers—however difficult it may be to quantify—the companies seem to think that they're getting their money's worth. The big clients—with names like General Electric, Pepsi and fellow Mainers L.L. Bean—keep coming back for more. Return customers accounted for about 50 percent of last year's total business.

As the sun sets on the island, everyone is safe inside, chatting, laughing. But you can't help wondering whether anyone here feels genuinely, lastingly changed. Sure, everyone's made some new friends, taken in a little fresh air and maybe even learned something useful. But when Monday morning comes around again, will anyone feel or behave all that differently?

Who can say? But maybe meeting the small challenges, making a few friends and learning the value of a little fresh ocean air . . . maybe it is worth the price. ■