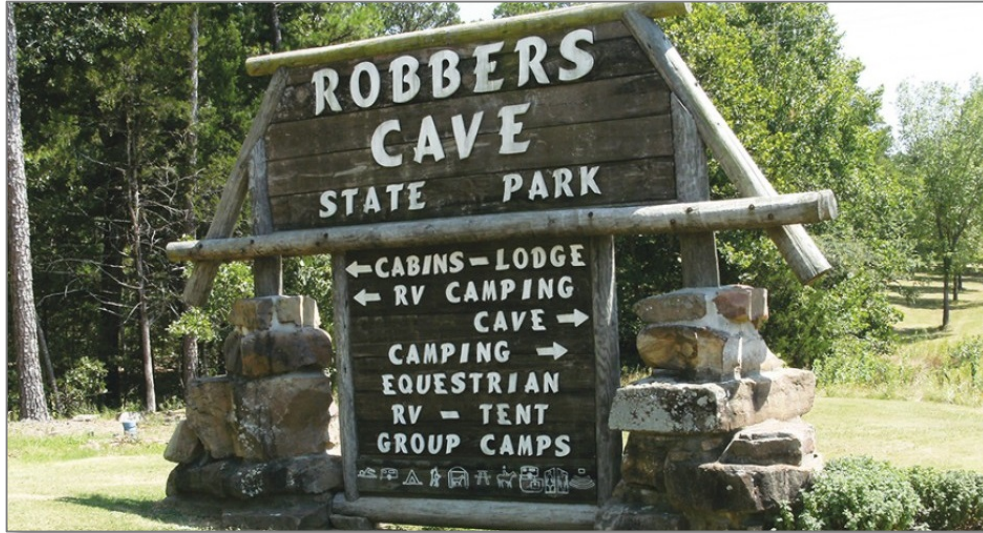


Resolve Company Conflicts with Two Lessons from Robbers Cave



Ever have issues with silos or departmental skirmishes in your organization?

Ever see performance decrease because of conflicts between different divisions?

If you have had to deal with animosity or communication problems between departments or individuals, then your team could benefit from the lessons of the Robbers Cave story.

As a [teamwork speaker](#) and team building facilitator, it is one of the most fascinating and enlightening stories of group and interpersonal dynamics I have found...

Over 60 years ago, a Turkish-American social psychologist by the name of Muzafer Sherif conducted the Robbers Cave experiment in southeastern Oklahoma.

The experiment was focused on group conflict and team dynamics, and involved 22 boys from middle-class two-parent Protestant homes, aged 11-12, who did not know each other prior to the experience.

The boys were arranged into two groups, and the three-phase experiment began.

Phase One of the Experiment:

In phase ONE of the experiment, the boys were given time a week or so to bond within their own group. During that time, they established a hierarchy of status and norms of behavior. They also chose names for their group: one was the Rattlers, and the other was the Eagles.

Toward the end of this first phase, the groups were given a glimpse of the others, and while there was no interaction, there were hostile comments and an “us vs. them” perception quickly developed.

Inside your organization, you may have seen symptoms of similar perceptions - with one clique “badmouthing” or feeling superior to (or distrustful of) another group...

Phase Two of the Experiment:

In phase TWO of the experiment, the staff (researchers) announced that there would be competitions between the two of them. This phase also lasted just under a week, and included competitive activities such as tug-of-wars, tent-pitching races, baseball, etc. During that time, the two groups became increasingly aggressive toward each other. When they met the first time at the mess hall together, name calling and threatening comments occurred. This grew into more violent actions, with the Eagles burning a flag the Rattlers had made. The Rattlers retaliated the next night by raiding the Eagles’ cabin and overturning their beds and taking some of their things.

The Eagles won the tournament of competitive activities, but both groups had escalated their actions to the point of filling socks with rocks to prepare for a fight (which the camp staff intervened to stop).

Inside your organization, you may have seen - or even invited and encouraged – competitive activities between the opposing cliques or divisions that exist. As illustrated in the Robbers Cave example, those competitive experiences seldom lead to more productive interactions.





Phase Three of the Experiment:

In phase THREE of the experiment (after a day or two of cool-off time), the camp staff designed opportunities to integrate the two groups and dissipate their hostilities. This phase began with simple “get-to-know-you” opportunities like showing a film together, a bean-collecting activity, and shared meal time.

Unfortunately, these experiences had little positive impact, and resulted in thrown food or more name-calling... so the researchers decided to try something different. So, following the failed “contact only” examples, the researchers arranged scenarios that presented challenges where success was only possible if they worked together.

These “superordinate” goal activities included a drinking water problem, where the boys were told that the water source had failed somehow, and they had to find the problem and fix it in order to have something to drink. They eventually found a sack blocking the line at an outlet, and rejoiced together after working for nearly an hour to fix the problem and produce running water again.

But that night there was another food fight at dinner.

So the researchers gave them other “superordinate” challenges. One was to figure out how to pay for a movie they all wanted to watch that the camp budget wouldn’t cover (the boys all invested a few dollars each to make it happen). Another one was to free a truck (carrying food for all campers) from out of a rut so it could deliver their supplies.

After those shared challenges that required cooperation, the groups not only got along, but they sat together on the bus that took them home and were not sitting according to their earlier Rattler or Eagle group affiliations. The Rattlers even spent their \$5 prize for winning the bean toss competition to buy malts for all boys to enjoy!

Inside your organization, you may have seen how, given occasion to work together on something important, people do what is necessary to succeed, but don't always come away from the experience a great deal more trusting or connected. Group identity and allegiances are often formed far more quickly than they are changed.



TWO Robbers Cave Lessons You Can Apply:

Following the Robbers Cave experiment, companies and leaders have had over 60 years to digest [the results that Sherif reported](#).

But while his study on “Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation” has been available for decades, very few leaders have taken advantage of the lessons it offers for everyday applications. So here are two important take-aways YOU can use from the Robbers Cave story – so your team enjoys more productivity and positive interactions.

TAKE-AWAY LESSON 1:

Once “lines are drawn” and divisions / cliques are formed, a sense of **organizational unity can only be reached with intentional focus on providing meaningful cooperative interactions.**



Simple “bonding time” for people to be near each other (sitting beside someone at a meeting or movie, or going bowling or just eating together) does not provide the shared experience that is required to create a feeling of cohesiveness or connection of a strong team.

If you want to bring your people together and create a more collaborative and united culture, you must design opportunities where they have to depend on one another to overcome a challenge and have a chance to celebrate and reflect on their shared success. That is the beauty of professionally facilitated team building events.

TAKE-AWAY LESSON 2:

Your company culture will not be adequately transformed after only one experience.

Team building - developing a team culture of trust and empathy - is achieved with intentional focus and persistence. Great leaders understand that group dynamics are not forged in one afternoon, and are not something that can be neglected (unless you like watching food fights, or some other version of them).

An annual retreat or company team building event can have a tremendous positive impact on your communication and morale – but if you are trying to create connections and build relationships and establish trust among your departments or individuals you will want to design multiple and frequent opportunities for them to learn about and depend on each other.

Team unity is the result of two things – connecting people to a goal, and then connecting them to each other! The more your people understand about the competencies, challenges, and character of other people and divisions, the more they will begin to assume the positive about their intentions and behaviors.

Company culture is basically the daily repeated behaviors that your people are willing to accept. As a leader, if you allow your people (or departments) to remain separate and disconnected, their animosity and negative assumptions will grow.

If you pit them against one another in competitive activities they are likely to become even more antagonistic.



If you truly want to resolve your team conflicts, let the Robbers Cave story and its lessons be the reason that you design more chances for your people to **WORK and LAUGH together on things that require their cooperation and allow for them to connect personally.**

My experience has shown that it doesn't take years to build a strong sense of organizational unity.

I wrote a [teamwork book](#) with the recipe for building GREAT teams fast - and the lessons from Robbers Cave are a similar and terrific reminder that:

- *people often behave badly when they perceive an “us vs. them” situation*
- *people assume the worst about others when they are uninformed*
- *people are sometimes made even more angry or distrustful by competition*
- *people who have a shared goal will often find a way to work together*
- *people need more than one isolated experience to build trust and relationships*

Are you struggling with a group whose behavior resembles the Rattlers and the Eagles during phases one or two? If you'd like to chat about how to design a few impactful opportunities for them to enjoy more cooperation, collaboration, and cohesiveness, shoot me an email at sean@greatreulststeambuilding.com.

Cliques and silos are a symptom of disconnected people.

Your people want to be happy and sitting together on the same metaphorical bus... and you can design or provide “phase three” activities that will help them get there.

