The physical and mental challenges of obstacle courses, like this one that Reebok set up for its employees on the golf course at the Westin Diplomat Resort & Spa, are good for attendees’ health and their ability to focus during a meeting, say experts.
W
hile Americans have a longer life expectancy than ever before — 78.7 years, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) — 11.5 percent of Americans suffer from heart disease, and obesity rates for the past 20 years have increased dramatically and remain high. More than one-third of adults (35.7 percent) are considered obese.

“It has to be a priority for organizations and meetings to understand that optimal performance at work starts with somebody’s health,” says Matt Johnson, director of business development and peak performance trainer for health-and-performance company On Target Living, based out of East Lansing, MI. Johnson works with meeting groups and organizations to find ways to help people adopt healthier lifestyles. “Planners have to look at how much rest they’re giving attendees, what kind of food they’re serving, and how to get people moving and out of a stationary position. These are all things that we teach people on an individual level that really makes an impact on a meeting.”

Caring about attendees’ health can make planners look like heroes to their organizations, says Joann A. Chmura, a strategic meeting manager based in Trumbull, CT, who’s had nearly 20 years of experience in the health-insurance industry. “Teach people how to make better decisions,” she says. “If you want to incorporate health and wellness into a meeting, it has to begin with yourself and the examples you set. There’s value in the skills that we bring to the table, and it makes you a more credible planner in the long run.”

Keep Them Moving
In March 2013, nearly 700 meeting attendees at The Westin Diplomat Resort & Spa in Hollywood, FL, ran, jumped, and crawled their way through an obstacle course that included four-to eight-foot-tall walls, barbed-wire fences, spear throwing, weighted tire running, and even a gladiator arena.

Was this part of an extreme version of boot camp? No. It was an internal launch event for Reebok’s partnership with the Spartan Race, an intense obstacle race phenomenon that’s become

Cover Story

Rx for Attendees

SIMPLE WAYS TO MAKE YOUR MEETINGS HEALTHIER, AND BETTER, FOR ALL INVOLVED

By Deanna Ting

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Learning the Ropes

I recently experienced the ropes course at the Mission Inn Resort & Spa in Howey-in-the-Hills, FL, and while it wasn’t necessarily physically tough in the way a Reebok Spartan Race might be, it certainly posed a mental challenge for me, and for my fellow team members.

While climbing up to the very top of a 20-foot wooden pole, I was almost certain that I wouldn’t be able to stand at the very top and take the “leap of faith.” Logically, I knew it was possible: I was safely harnessed and there was no way I’d fall to the ground thanks to my team members, who held on tightly to the ropes that kept me secure. Still, it was absolutely terrifying. Somehow, though, I managed to make it and once I came down, I felt relieved, proud, grateful for my team members, and, well, still a little bit terrified.

My team facilitator, Jeff Whitehead, president of Front Royal, VA-based Ascend Development Group, says that the effectiveness of rope courses — or any physical activity that encourages teamwork — is invaluable. “Climbing up a pole is not necessarily a transferrable life or work skill,” he explains. “But that mental process where you get to that moment when you need to motivate yourself to stand up and then take that leap — that working conversation in your mind — now, that’s a transferrable skill for work, and life.” Aside from giving me a good upper body workout, the added bonus from all that climbing and balancing was immeasurable: realizing my potential, and what I’m capable of accomplishing.

— D.T.

Cover Story

A recent 11-mile hike from Aspen, CO, to Crested Butte, CO, proved to be a rewarding experience for a corporate group led by Steamboat Springs, CO-based Iconic Adventures

Colleen Cosgrove and Matt Powell, event marketing managers for Canton, MA-based Reebok, organized the event to give the employees a chance to experience a somewhat scaled-down version of a Spartan Race on the resort’s 18-hole championship golf course. Along with promoting the new partnership to employees from around the world, the shared challenge of an obstacle course brought people together, says Cosgrove. “The nice thing about the Spartan Race is that it really brings home the idea of working as a community and a team,” she says. “You’ll be faced with an obstacle and have your team members helping you out. It gives you a great sense of community, and this feeling of accomplishing something you didn’t think you’d be able to do.”

When a meeting offers something as unexpected as an obstacle race, it also challenges participants to think differently, says Archie Tew, an experiential learning facilitator based out of Santa Fe, NM. “We’re always having companies ask employees to think differently, but if every meeting they turn up to is the same or there’s a replicable pattern, their brains just lock into what they expect to happen and you’re solidifying what they already thought,” he explains. “If you want someone to benefit from a meeting and contribute to it, you need to do something differently that grabs attention and forces her to think, do, or see things differently.”

Eli Campbell, director of business development, for Steamboat Springs, CO-based Iconic Adventures, says that active experiences like hikes, cycling, or even something like a campfire in the woods are instrumental in helping clients have successful meetings. “A lot of companies head to the conference room every year and get the same results, but when you change it up and do something outdoors, you can get people to open up a little more,” he says.

For one meeting group, attendees were invited to participate in an 11-mile hike from Aspen to Crested Butte, CO, with varying elevation levels. “People were nervous, but by the end
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of it, they had a personal transformation that translated to a newfound confidence that they could push themselves personally and professionally, and they could connect with their colleagues, too,” says Campbell.

Offering a variety of activities, from running to croquet, for varying fitness levels is also important. At the PGA National Resort in Palm Beach Gardens, FL, Jennifer Orisi, manager of health and racquet, says, “Giving people a choice to do something active that really suits their abilities will still challenge them, and build tremendous camaraderie.”

Walking meetings are another opportunity to not only forge better bonds but also spark innovation. During last February’s TED conference, corporate director and author Nilofer Merchant coined a new phrase — “sitting is the new smoking” — to drive home the dangers that stem from doing what many of us do every day at work and at meetings: sit. Speaking directly to the packed auditorium, she said, “What you’re doing right now is killing you … We sit more than we sleep. Sitting has become the smoking of our generation.”

Merchant is right. In November 2011, research presented at a meeting for the American Institute for Cancer Research suggested that nearly 49,000 cases of breast cancer and almost 43,000 cases of colon cancer might have been prevented if we simply weren’t so sedentary.

In her TED talk, Merchant urges her audience to have walking meetings. The social interaction, combined with the changes in scenery, she says, are crucial for innovation. “You’ll be surprised at how fresh air drives fresh thinking,” she concludes in her speech.

Two ways to incorporate walking into a meeting is to choose a destination that encourages walking or make walking a part of the meeting transportation. Penny Goldsberry, CEO and founder of Dallas-based Event One Meetings, used the first strategy during an August 2013 leaders’ conference that she organized for Freeman at the Omni La Costa Resort & Spa in Carlsbad, CA. “When you look at it, of health and racquet, says, “Giving people a choice to do something active that really suits their abilities will still challenge them, and build tremendous camaraderie.”

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Discover experiences that simply don’t exist anywhere else.
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on-site health assessments.

At the Greenbrier Clinic, a full medical facility at The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, WV, is taking care of the health of meeting attendees one step further. Tonja Ridgeway, project coordinator at the clinic describes it as “a full-blown hospital without the hospital beds and an MRI unit.” At the clinic, executives can have a full head-to-toe physical examination that’s more thorough than most, and can be completed over the span of one to two days, much shorter than the average physical examination. From colonoscopies and EKGs to stress testing, vaccinations, and nutrition services, the clinic offers them all, as well as on-site health fairs where simple lab procedures like cholesterol or lipid panels can be done for meeting attendees.

Ridgeway says that the clinic recently examined an attendee who needed an immediate cardiac catheterization. “This gentleman said he was dizzy and nauseous, and so we immediately had him see one of our physicians, and the doctor noticed he could have easily gone into cardiac arrest at any minute,” she says. “This ended up saving his life.”

Ridgeway says that the importance of taking care of one’s personal health remains crucial, especially in today’s fast-paced working environments. “The unfortunate thing is that so many individuals wait until it gets to that point.”

**Food Is Fuel**

Offering foods that not only taste good, but give attendees the energy to stay awake — and feel better overall — is crucial to obtaining any meeting objective. “If you have a meeting where they’re serving you lots of pop and poor-quality foods, you’re not creating an optimal learning environment,” explains On Target Living’s Matt Johnson. “If the goal of your meeting, for example, is to have attendees learn how to improve sales, and you have them drink soda pop, it jacks them up and lowers their energy.”

Sugar content is a crucial nutritional aspect that many planners neglect, says Tracy Stuckrath, president and chief connecting officer of Atlanta-based Thrive! Meetings & Events. “The average person consumes 142 pounds of sugar per year, and most of it is coming from pre-packaged and processed foods.” She says that meeting break snacks that feature sugary pastries will give attendees a temporary sugar high, followed by an inevitable crash.

Derek Johnson, executive nutrition director for The Biggest Loser Resorts, and founder of Santa Monica, CA-based wellness and nutrition company New Metabolism, agrees. “You never want to have people on the ‘glucose chase’ where you’re chasing sugar all day. It’s a roller-coaster ride no one wants to be on.” He says the key to avoiding the glucose chase is offering “glycemia-balanced foods” that won’t raise blood sugar levels to an unhealthy high. This includes a healthy mix of fats, proteins, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, and an avoidance of starchy carbohydrates like potatoes or huge portions of pasta and rice. He also recommends the use of better sugar substitutes such as Truvia.

Stuckrath says planners should also “think about hidden sugar.” She explains, “There are about 67 different words for sugar and you have to be on the lookout for any ingredient that ends in an ‘-ose.’” For example, offer fresh berries and granola instead of pre-packaged and processed foods.
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of dried fruits that may have added sugar.

More and more hotel brands, including Radisson Blu Hotels & Resorts and Westin Hotels & Resorts, have heeded the concept of food as fuel, creating innovative F&B menus that place as much of an emphasis on nutritional value as taste.

At Radisson Blu, Christer Larsson, vice president of food and beverage for the Americas, and his team have created special breakfast and lunch menus for meetings and events, called Brain Food for Meetings, which launched in the U.S. last fall. All Brain Food dishes must be made with fresh, local ingredients, with a maximum fat content of 10 percent, and never more than 10 percent added sugar. “We know that whatever we eat will affect us very directly and on top of that, the food is not good and not enough down time means there’s no chance for people to walk around, move, and get some sunlight.”

As far back as 2007, Westin began offering SuperFoodsRx menus that feature plenty of fruit, vegetables, grains, and proteins that are scientifically proven to improve health, and longevity. Bob Jacobs, vice president of Westin Hotels & Resorts in North America, notes the popularity of Westin’s SuperFoods Meetings Breaks package. “The package includes morning and afternoon breaks with SuperFoods menu items that are based on nutritional concepts that encourage productivity,” he explains.

Another way to make your meeting healthier is to simply keep attendees hydrated. “Hydration is so key,” says The Biggest Loser Resorts’ Johnson. Stuckrath adds, “Add those big water containers in the back of the room. Seventy-five percent of Americans are dehydrated and when you’re dehydrated, you have brain fog, gain weight, and sleep restlessly.”

Both agree that you should reduce the amount of caffeinated drinks that you offer to attendees. “You need to drink two glasses of water to counteract the dehydration effect of just one Red Bull,” says Stuckrath.

With regard to serving and imbibing alcoholic beverages, Johnson has this advice: “Never drink on an empty stomach. Drink water throughout the day before you even begin to have alcohol, and drink it before bed if you plan to drink alcohol.”

**Take More Breaks**

“The No. 1 cause of an unhealthy meeting, in my opinion, is a lack of breaks,” says On Target Living’s Johnson. “Too much on the agenda and not enough down time means there’s no chance for people to walk around, move, and get some sunlight.”

Not only that, but having too few breaks, or breaks that are very short in duration, can hinder the learning process, as well as engagement. “The mind has very limited short-term working memory,” Andrea E. Sullivan, M.A., founder of BrainStrength Systems, explains. “Our attention is a limited resource. If we are scheduling back-to-back sessions and there are very few breaks, and on top of that, the food is not good and healthy, people will get really drained and will retain less information. They won’t be able to engage. Engagement is not just about what you do, but about providing the space for people to also take care of themselves and rejuvenate.”

Meditation and breathing exercises can also have an impact on mental and physical performance. Take, for example, the recent Super Bowl Champions, the Seattle Seahawks: Part of their training includes regularly scheduled yoga and meditation sessions.

Because the Omni La Costa also houses a location of The Chopra Center for Wellbeing, Goldsberry worked with the center to incorporate interactive meeting breaks that focused on breathing exercises, posture, and meditation. “Someone from the center would come over during breaks and teach attendees simple things they could take back to their desks and use throughout their normal lives,” she explains. “We thought there might be some people who would be resistant to these new ways of approaching things but everybody really embraced closing their eyes and having that mindfulness.” She says the feedback from attendees was “incredible.” “A lot of people have also incorporated doing yoga with their team and sharing what they’d learned.”

In a similar way, a meeting group at the Moana Surfrider recently participated in an ancient Hawaiian hoala (awakening) ceremony that involves waking up before dawn and meeting with a kahuna (priest) who performs a blessing on the beach, followed by chanting, meditation, and a cleansing ritual in the ocean as the sun rises. “I was amazed to see how people who were suspect of it walked away feeling very connected with one another,” says Stuart Y. Kotake, associate director of catering and event management. The morning ritual, he says, along with plenty of free time afterward to have a group breakfast, and then go to the spa or work out, made attendees feel more centered, focused, and productive by the time they started their meeting at 11 a.m.

**Get Executive Buy-In**

C-suite level support can have a tremendous impact on a planner’s ability to make a meeting more healthful. During Chicago-based Equity Residential’s three leadership summits in October 2013, it was instrumental in motivating attendees to participate in morning fitness.
activities such as a power-walk and Zumba class. “If all of your VPs go to a walk, that sets a great example,” says Beth A. Cooper-Zobott, director of conference services. “People feel like they’re not the only ones and they look at that as a great networking opportunity.”

Vice presidents from Equity Residential even went a step further in showing their support for health and wellness. “The local VP at our first summit in Oakland, CA, issued a challenge to the other regional VPs who would be attending the other summits in Southern California and Washington, D.C., to try to beat her team’s level of participation in those morning power-walks.” The friendly competition worked: “At each summit, the number of walkers rose until we had more than a 60-percent participation rate,” says Cooper-Zobott.

Steamboat Springs, CO-based SmartWool, a maker of performance apparel, demonstrates its corporate commitment to health, wellness, and sustainability in its meeting, too, says Iconic Adventures’ Campbell. “Every summer, they go to the Outdoor Retailer trade show and, to get there, all 50 attending employees actually participate in a four-day cycling event that we organize. It’s 350 miles, and it’s a way for their leadership to demonstrate that this isn’t just something they have to do — it’s a part of their brand.”

“Living the brand” also ties into the events that Cosgrove and Powell organize for Reebok. “We’re not just saying, ‘be healthy.’ We’re actually living it every day,” says Cosgrove.

From the vast number of fitness facilities at the Canton, MA-based headquarter campus (a basketball court, workout studios, and a running track) to little reminders, like stickers inside the elevator that encourage people to take the stairs instead, employees always know that they have the support of their corporate leadership when it comes to leading a healthy lifestyle. “There are so many ways to provide things to employees to let them carve time out in the day to make fitness a priority,” she says. SM Questions or comments? Email dting@ntmllc.com

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