Team Building Exercises
By Michael E. Witzgall
Tactical Training Consultant
Charlie-Mike Enterprises, Inc.

The first time I encountered a team building exercise was back in 1983 while attending advanced Reserve Officer Training at Fort Lewis, Washington. At the time, the U.S. Army called this program the Leadership Reaction Course (LRC). I remember standing there open-mouthed, looking at a monstrosity made of wood and metal and wondering what exactly I had gotten myself into this time. As best I can describe it, the LRC is a series of partitioned off stations (or rooms) that have an open front and are separated by ten-foot high walls. Each room has its own challenge – or a series of challenges – that a team must complete in a specified amount of time. These challenges are both physically and mentally demanding in the extreme.

After only a few minutes of looking at this military contraption, my squad of soon-to-be 2nd Lieutenants were assigned our first "challenge." We were told that the 12 of us had to get over an 8-foot high wall. No problem I thought. This drill is for sissies! Then the instructors explained the rules and my whole perception of the exercise changed from contempt to confusion and worry. We were informed that while attempting to get over the wall, we could not touch any part of the wall, nor the four feet in front of the wall or the two feet behind the wall. As an added bonus, we were told that we could not talk – only point and grunt. If we violated these rules we would be docked valuable time, resources and finally manpower. We were then given all the materials the instructors said we would need to accomplish this task; but, as we quickly discovered, ropes, wood and muscle were only part of the solution. If there was not decisive leadership and teamwork, my group of fledgling warriors would fail this challenge and the LRC would claim its first victims of the day. A dubious honor at best!

In civilian society the LRC goes by various names like Confidence course, Challenge course or High and Low Ropes courses. Though toned down in *some respects* for the less athletically inclined but still venturesome corporate type, each "course," like the LRC, is designed with specific goals or learning points in mind. Nationally, these courses have become extremely popular tools to teach and reinforce everything from leadership to business-group cohesion. As a part of our Basic SWAT course curriculum, Charlie-Mike Enterprises, Inc. has included some is team building exercises (modeled specifically after the military LRC) since about 1993. While we *certainly* cannot claim that we were the very first to do so, I do believe that we were one of the first to see the training value in team building exercises as being relevant to SWAT. Over the last decade and a half, this concept has grown and is now found in almost every Basic and/or Advanced SWAT school curriculum. While this training is outstanding, there is, unfortunately, a misconception as to what a team building exercise really is. There are some SWAT schools that have included in their curriculum training exercises under the name of team building exercises that are nothing of the sort.

For example, one SWAT School in this region is noted for having Basic SWAT students carry a large heavy object (an 18-wheeler tire) several miles while running in full tactical

gear as instructors circle the students yelling harassing insults. At first glance, the above drill does have some of the attributes found in a team building exercise. It requires endurance, strength and group cooperation (i.e. running in step). On close scrutiny, however, you would discover that it lacks confidence building, innovative thinking/planning and any true level of required leadership. This type of drill can (and generally does) destroy unit or class cohesion. It blatantly points out the weaknesses of some team members and forces the stronger team members to compensate for that weakness. In theory that should help build team unity by making people work together; however, with no designated leaders (formal or informal) making decisions and cadre failing to act as a control factor, lost tempers will eventually be verbalized with derogatory comments thus adding resentment and frustration to an already difficult situation. For a lack of a better term, this exercise quickly becomes an *exercise in futility*.

Note: Students that actually attended that specific school provided the description of the "team building exercise" in the above paragraph. During our interview, several months after the fact, their resentment was still very apparent.

So, using the above illustration as a good example of a very bad example, what really constitutes a team building exercise? What tactical skills and attributes should it emphasize, and how should it be structured and run? Before I answer those questions, the following issues will have to be resolved when developing or using a team building exercise (or a series of exercises). First; what will be the assigned level of difficulty for each drill? Second; we want the drill to be as safe as we can possibly make it; however, to keep a tactical officer interested, there must be an element of risk. So how do we make the drill "risky" and safe at the same time? And third; how do we make the drill job applicable?

Level of difficulty: Drills stressing only high levels of physical fitness are not, as we have previously pointed out, necessarily good team building exercises. Therefore whatever the exercise is, it must be both physically *and* mentally demanding. When creating a team building exercise, assure that (no matter how difficult it is) it is realistically do-able under given constraints and specific guidelines or rules. A common problem when creating an exercise is failing to know when to back off or when to increase the level of difficulty. Unless specially designed for failure, an exercise that has a better than 75% failure rate is far too difficult or complicated and will only serve to frustrate the participants. Conversely, an exercise that has an approximate 60% success rate is pretty much on target. Any greater percentage of success and the drill is too easy.

Note: A f*ailure by design* exercise is a drill that is specifically designed to have a greater than 95% failure rate. It is still do-able, but not likely. This type of exercise should *only* be used to drive home a much needed learning point and then only with veteran teams not in a school environment.

Risk: Let's face it, the average SWAT operator is an A-type personality. Like our military Special Forces brethren, we are the apex predator in our line of work. To us, almost every thing we do must have a level of risk to get our attention and keep our

interest. Even though many team building exercises have obstacles that require strength and endurance and must be climbed or jumped over, the average SWAT officer does not view that type of thing as being much of a risk. Such exercises may be considered difficult and trying – but not very risky. The bottom line is that we face physical danger almost everyday we go to work. That's nothing new to us; however, if you add to the physical and mental challenge *a perceived chance of failure*, the entire drill takes on a different light. For a tactical officer *the fear of failure* is enough to kick us into high gear. One last thing concerning risk, don't confuse dangerous (or stupid) for being risky. When we train and do these team-building exercises, always keep in mind that just because we can do something (*or make others do something*) does not mean that we should.

Job applicable: Since I have never been one, I don't know how climbing over an 8-foot wall without touching it might help a corporate CEO in his/her job performance; however, based on my experiences in the military and in SWAT, being able to accomplish such a feat because we were trained to think and plan in an innovative manner came in handy more than once. Most SWAT officers view anything that is challenging, involves physical and mental work, ropes, wood, metal and a reason to use it all at the same time as job applicable (it's just in our nature – no sarcasm intended) especially if there is a heroic SWAT-type story line worked into the exercise.

With those three issues discussed, we can begin to address the other pertinent questions related to the use and development of team building exercises.

1.   **What really constitutes a team building exercise?** By its very name such drills should help to develop team cohesion. That's obvious; but it is easier to assign the title than it is to put the concept into practice. In this context, what working well together truly means is when a group of individuals sets aside preconceived notions to form a team so that the team can accomplish a specified task. Therefore, a true team building exercise is a drill or a series of drills that forces a group (or a class) into that level of cooperation *in-spite* of their differences. Remember, it takes several days of hard work (by both students and instructors) and more than *one* team building exercise to achieve this goal.

Basic SWAT Class 2-08 Members of the Green team are working on completing the "Water-Drop." They found a solution, but not necessarily the school book solution – oh well, you cannot argue with success! This class had 32 outstanding officers from 13 different departments in attendance.

2.   **What tactical/SWAT oriented skills should such drills emphasize?** As previously discussed, each exercise must be job applicable. With that thought in mind, when creating a drill, each drill should emphasize critical – but often overlooked – interrelated skills that specifically pertain to SWAT. The following is a list of these skills that, in varying degrees, each drill must stress to be an effective team building exercise.

- Teamwork. Teamwork is the hopeful end product of a team building exercise that only occurs after personality differences have been set aside. In this context, the single most important aspect of teamwork is the realization that everyone on the team can contribute to the success of the mission if allowed to participate.

- Communicating. This skill is one of the most difficult to teach and, unfortunately, one of the most difficult to learn. A breakdown in communications is the greatest reason for failure in the military, law enforcement and in corporate America. In SWAT, communicating is very problematic because much of what we do involves the use of radios. Therefore a team building exercise designed for SWAT should reinforce these two simple concepts:

  a. The person speaking must think about what they are going to say (and what they want done) before they blurt it out and confuse everyone with nonsense. What they are saying must be clear and concise.
  b. The person listening must indeed listen and then have the common sense to ask for clarification on points he/she did not understand.

  These concepts must be accomplished quickly and without a great deal of discussion during the course of a real tactical mission. One of the many tricks that we use during our Basic SWAT team building exercises is to make the entire team speak in limerick (see Green Eggs and Ham by Dr. Seuss). While this might sound rather silly, it truly reinforces the speaker having to think before talking and the listener having to ask for clarification before acting.

- Innovative thinking. No tactical mission, be it a dope raid, barricaded suspect or a hostage rescue, is as simple as it might appear to be. During a tactical mission SWAT teams constantly have to adapt to circumstances that are in a continuous state of evolution. To do this, we must be able to think in an innovative manner – or more aptly put – think and plan outside the box.

- Leadership. Each drill must have an assigned leader; however, it should not always be the same person or a person that automatically assumes a leadership role based exclusively on his/her rank or personality. Team building exercises should be designed to exploit the *informal leader* and help that person develop a stronger leadership style.

- Physical conditioning. All team building exercises designed for SWAT should have at least some physical endurance and strength requirements. However, these two attributes should not be the sole focus for an exercise unless the "lesson" for *that specific drill* is to drive home the point that tactical officers must be in excellent physical condition. If that is the goal for an exercise, then that exercise must be made painfully job applicable. For instance. Instead of carrying a large heavy 18-wheeler tire several miles while running in full tactical gear – have the students carry a simulated wounded comrade on a stretcher for several hundred yards while crossing numerous obstacles to get the wounded man to safety. In my near 30 years of military and law enforcement experience, I have never had to rescue an 18-wheeler; but I have had to carry a wounded teammate on a stretcher.

Basic SWAT Class 2-08 A member of the Blue team on the "River Crossing" drill. At first glance, crawling across a 50 foot rope looks easy. But actually doing it is another question entirely. Though this drill is extremely physically demanding, it has an approximate 62% success rate.

3. **How should a team building exercise be structured and run?**   All team building exercises must have rules and tools. Not giving a team rules to an exercise or the correct tools to accomplish the drill is very much like a tactical commander who fails to give his team clear and concise orders or guidance when assigning the team a mission. Having rules to an exercise does not negate allowing our officers to think and plan in an innovative manner. Remember, innovative (thinking outside the box) does not mean ignoring policy, orders or State law.

A.   Team building exercises must have rules that are easily explained and easy to follow. If there is more than one exercise to be done, then you should have a set of "general rules" that apply to all of the drills. Then each exercise should have a set of rules that will apply specifically to that exact drill.   Finally there should be a standard means to score the drills if, like we often do, teams are competing against each other. Below is an example of one of our team building exercises called "The Platforms." In this exercise the team must move from the starting point to the ending point while staying on the platforms and avoiding the death areas and landmines.

i.   *The Platforms*: General rules: Each of the team building exercises used by Charlie-Mike Enterprises, Inc. has these (and more) common rules:

- The team has a total of 75 minutes (15 minutes of planning and 60 minutes or less to accomplish the mission).
- The team must begin the drill at the designated starting point and finish the drill at the designated ending point.
- Officers that touch a death area or a red landmine are dead.
- If a team member is killed by a violation of these or the exercise specific rules, he/she may be repurchased at a cost of 1 minute per each infraction.
- Officers repurchased, must re-enter the game where they were killed.
- Equipment touching a death area or a red land mine can be repurchased at a cost of 1 minute.

The Platforms ©
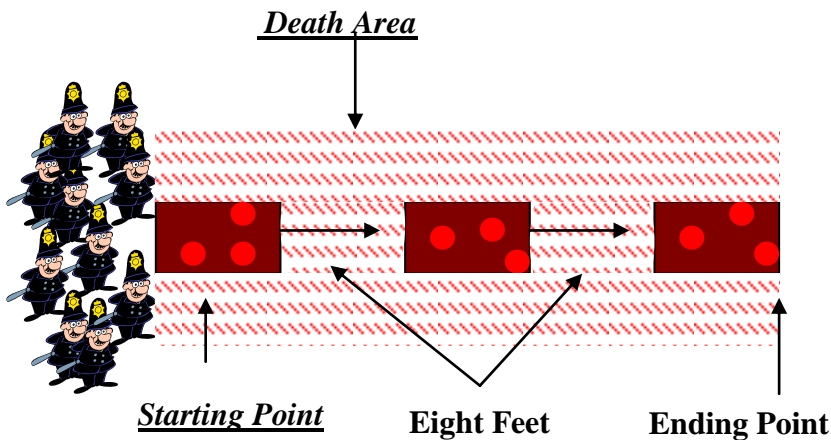
ii.   *The Platforms* - Specific rules:

- Officers may attempt to jump across a **Death Area *(8 feet)***; however, if the officer fails, he/she is dead and *cannot be repurchased*.
- An officer jumping only a few feet and failing may be repurchased at a cost of 5 minutes.
- The team may not move to the next platform until the ***entire group is together*** on the same platform. Failure to keep the group together cost 10 minutes for each infraction!
- ***No equipment may touch the ground in between the platforms***. The team continues on from that point after the 1 minute penalty.
- All materials MUST go with the team (if you start with it, you must finish with it).

iii.   Scoring: Having a scoring system (other than just pass/fail) helps a team to measure its success, but coming up with a good scoring system can be difficult at best. In our case, I ran all this by my math-whiz older brother who graciously came up with an

easy to use and follow scoring system (trust me, anything mathematically complicated and I would be lost). Here's what we use.

- Each officer has a point value. To get that point value, divide the number of officers involved in the drill into 100. In the illustration of the Platforms there are ten officers – so of course the value per officer is ten points. For each officer that completes the drill, the team earns those points. If all ten officers were to complete the Platforms, the team would earn 100 points if they got everyone across.

- The speed in which the drill is accomplished also has a point value. Remember, the team has 60 minutes to actually *do* the exercise. If a team completes the drill in, let's say, 40 minutes with no penalties. Take the 40 minutes and subtract it from 100. The remaining number of 60 is the points the team has earned. At this time, the team doing the Platforms would have 160 points if they got everyone across.

- Adding in penalties. If a team completes a drill in 58 minutes; but also has 12 minutes in penalties the total time it took the team to accomplish their mission was (58 + 12) 70 minutes. Take the 70 minutes and subtract it from 100. The remaining number of 30 is the points the team has earned.   At this time, the team doing the Platforms would have 130 points if they got everyone across.

One final note on scoring an exercise. If you have teams competing against one another and the teams are not even in man power – don't sweat it as long as the numbers are not too far off. Having a couple of extra people on a drill helps out as far as *having hands to work*; but, having more officers on a team is also a point-handicap. This means that the larger team must get more officers across the finish line to achieve an equal score with a team of fewer officers.

B.   Tools.   The students must be equipped with the necessary tools to accomplish the exercise. The best way to test the tool list is to run the drill with the instructors. Of course the instructors know the "schoolbook" solution (discussed below); but by doing a dry run with the assigned tools you will assure that; (a) the drill is do-able and; (b) that the given tools are serviceable and applicable for the exercise. For the Platforms exercise the students are given one 8 foot 4x4 with two holes drilled 6 inches apart at each end, one 2 foot 4x4 and two 15 foot lengths of rope.

Note: Extra pieces of equipment may be provided (i.e. lengths of rope); however, too much extra equipment will often distract the officers and will keep them from figuring out the schoolbook solution.

C.   Schoolbook Solutions: Every exercise must have a written (drawn-up) schoolbook solution. This does not mean that students will find it. They may come up with an answer that does not even remotely resemble the schoolbook solution; however, as long as their solution is safe, let them run with it. Regardless of whether or not a team is successful in

completing a drill, they almost always ask for the schoolbook solution. Having it drawn up to show them will add validity to the drill.

The Platforms (partial schoolbook solution)

- The starting end of bridging post is placed on the platform and blocked with the 2 foot 4x4 and a third officer seated with his/her feet (not shown) up against the 2 foot 4x4 to prevent sliding.

- The bridging post is then lowered by the ropes to within a few feet of the ground.
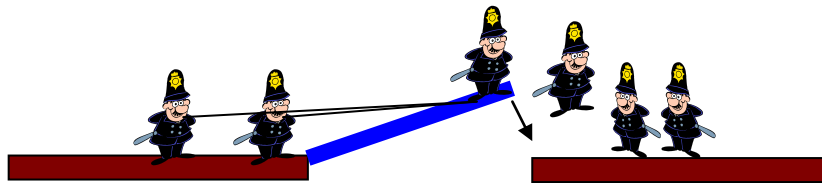
- Once the bridge post is lowered, team members can walk across to the next platform.

Safety and Cadre Responsibilities: During a team building exercise the cadre must act as safety and drill control officers both at the same time. In any training environment the primary purpose of the cadre (other than teaching and mentoring the students) is to assure that the training is conducted in the safest means possible. During training – *any training; but especially a team building exercise* – it is counter-productive to have people needlessly or foolishly injured.

Basic SWAT Class 2-08 The Red team has done an incredible job of coming up with the school book solution for the "Double Wall" drill. In this drill the team must get over two 4 foot - PVC pipe walls without touching either. Not seen in this picture are members of the cadre watching not only for rule infractions, but also for safety issues.

Cheating: There are two types of cheating that can occur during a team building exercise, these are:

- Accidental – such as when a student touches a land mine or steps into a death area and then looks to see if an instructor has seen it. If not, then the student will keep on playing as if nothing has happened. We do not expect the officers to stop the drill and confess. If seen, cadre members shouldn't let an infraction slide (after all rules are rules); however, every now and then letting an infraction go is the right thing to do – especially if the team is really working well together.

- Intentional – this is much more serious because it often involves a complete *disregard for the rules (rules usually geared toward safety issues).* If cadre members are watching the drill and acting as control/safety officers then intentional cheating will become difficult, but not impossible, to do. On those rare occasions when it does happen, justice must be swift and harsh – which may include dismissal from the training if the circumstances warrant it.

Conclusion: In our Basic SWAT course we run a different team building exercise each day of the school. The class is broken down into groups that compete against one another for bragging rights. By the end of the week these groups are functioning as well-lead and organized teams. No small feat when one considers that these team members were, for the most part, complete strangers only a few days before.

A well thought out and executed team building exercise is, in my opinion, one of the finest training tools available to tactical instructors. During SWAT schools, tactical officers often sit in classrooms listening to instructors babble on about leadership and team cohesion. When taught only in a classroom setting, that information is generally not retained by the students. In other words, it goes in one ear and right out the other. But couple that same classroom instruction with a solid hands-on team building exercise and the classroom lectures take on a significant level of meaning and retention.

The greatest value of team building exercises is that they teach, in the most subtle manner, that if the team works together they can succeed in defeating any challenge. And in that, there are no impossible obstacles for a good team, only obstacles that may appear to be so.

Michael E. Witzgall
Tactical Training Consultant
Charlie-Mike Enterprises, Inc.

The son of a career military officer, Mike spent 12 years on active duty as a noncommissioned and commissioned officer (mostly carrying a rifle, rubber boat, and dive equipment running up and down the beaches of sunny California). In 1988 Mike left the military and joined the Dallas Police Department. While with Dallas, Mike became a highly decorated officer serving as a patrolman and as a Tactical officer (SWAT). Mikes tenure with Dallas ended after a severe line of duty injury forced him into early retirement. Currently, Mike is co-owner of a business (Charlie-Mike Enterprises, Inc.) that specializes in teaching Basic and Advanced SWAT schools, Hostage Rescue training and Counter Paramilitary Operations courses. Mike can be contacted at (972) 291-7809 or at Dannerdog@aol.com. Charlie-Mike Enterprise, Inc. Website is under construction.