



Making Asia a Great Place to Work

The Houses that Baxter Built - Leadership in Action

Steve Morris, Head Coach,
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A multi-national top management team at Baxter Healthcare (Asia) has recently returned from a Leadership in Action Workshop in Cambodia where they learnt not only in classroom seminar style but also by hands-on involvement in a community project run by the Tabitha Foundation. Workshop organizer and facilitator, Steve Morris, Head Coach of Steve Morris Associates, tells us about this unusual but extremely impactful approach to team and leadership development.

“We came, we built and we left, forever changed.” Thus Mei Waterhouse, General Manager South-East Asia, summed up the recent visit of 14 top managers from Baxter Healthcare (Asia) to Cambodia. But this short statement says much more.

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The multinational team of managers from Singapore, Korea, Philippines, India, Taiwan and the United States went to Cambodia for a unique transformational team and individual leadership development workshop. An unusual place to choose for such a program perhaps. But the venue very much made the event. Cambodia has many lessons for those willing to look and learn, as this team was. Around them were poor children, land mine victims, land mine clearance teams at work, and a community of people who had all experienced close personal loss.

The present situation in Cambodia forces people to get their priorities in order. A good learning point for busy executives who have to balance the demands for immediate financial results against the needs to make a positive impact, to be human and humane.

Tang Swee Seng, Vice President – Finance/IS, will never forget the experience he shared with his colleagues across Asia. "Twenty years from now, when I meet you on the street with my grandchildren, I will introduce you, not as the colleague that I delivered our budget with in the year 2000, but as the colleague that I built a house with in Cambodia."



Steve Morris Associates

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Always on the run

The Baxter team had been so busy meeting their financial targets that it had become difficult to meet together regularly. Each team member knew he/she had a problem about a lack of sharing information and expressing differences of opinion but they did not know how to overcome it. Seems like there was always something else that took priority. The team's focus on performance overshadowed their need to stay connected and in synch.

In addition they had become comfortable in their familiarity with each other and were no longer challenging each other. Taking the team away for five days was the beginning. A program that would identify the core business issues and link all activities to this was the means.

Holding the workshop in Cambodia proved the right stimulus to challenge their perceptions of each other and the way they worked together. Building a house together helped them to break new ground as a team.

Custom crafted to impact business leadership

The *Leadership in Action* Workshop specifically focused on those areas, which were of importance to the Baxter team. "This is a timely opportunity to discuss employee feedback on setting directions and accelerated growth and future expectations," commented Alberto Bautista, President of Baxter Healthcare (Asia). "It is also an opportunity to celebrate the outstanding performance of the year-to-date."

The team's long-term objective was to discover themselves and each other and learn how to be more inspiring and effective team leaders within their own geographies.

"I hope that this event will not just be educational and motivational but also energizing and transformational," said Alberto Bautista in his opening message to the team. "If successful, it could turn into a regular initiative every six months or so, to allow us all to step out of the norm and beyond for philosophical and strategic thinking."

The workshop design incorporated my three organizational principles:

- ◇ Teamwork starts at the top - if leadership excellence is developed and maintained at the top, it is easier to attain for the entire organization.
- ◇ Leaders within matrixed organizations need to work especially hard to know and read each other well for speedy decision-making and execution.
- ◇ Leaders learn best when 'pushed out of their comfort zone.'

In addition to a classroom seminar approach, a new element was integrated into the design to enable the team to learn from experience beyond the workplace - by building houses for those in need.

This unique transformative approach required the team to shake off old habits and entrenched thinking and adopt new attitudes and behaviors. It challenged them to deliver dramatic results during the actual workshop. By enhancing teamwork skills, productivity and commitment, it will in the long-term lead to improved organizational and individual development as they become more effective in:

- ◇ Understanding the characteristics of effective teams;
- ◇ Understanding their own leadership style and the implications of this on their own teams;
- ◇ Enhancing their ability to develop effective teams;
- ◇ Improving their skills in motivating others;

Over the course of their five days the team was readily able to transfer the information from community work into their business improvement process.

The house that Baxter built

The Tabitha Foundation helps volunteers to build houses for the homeless. Founder Janne Ritskes has based her mission on giving dignity to the people she works with and nurturing them to achieve their dream. No family is given a house at Tabitha. They must pay for the foundations so as to earn their own stake in the project. Many spend years living in cardboard shacks while saving the money.

The houses built are basic: floor, roof and walls, with no plumbing or electricity. On arrival the group found that the foundations had been erected on stilts but they had to do the rest. They divided into roof, floor and wall teams. The floor came first and then the roof to shade them from the sun. Finally, the walls were put together on the ground and required the co-ordination and co-operation of the entire team to raise into the air and secure in place.

The team built two houses for two Khmer families. They learnt much about themselves and each other but above all they gave shelter and hope to those in desperate need.

Their approach was largely unplanned. The three teams had no experience. They didn't discuss anything but managed to complete the first house in six hours – the fastest time ever, claimed Janne. On the second day, they didn't change anything except to try to do it faster, forgetting that the unaccustomed exercise of the day before would make them more tired.

At the same time the group demonstrated strong teamwork. Nobody pulled rank. They helped each other and looked out for each other. They also learned about their collective strengths and the need to pace themselves so that everyone could keep up.

Suddenly realization dawned. They tended to run the business like they built the houses. Little thought, little long-term planning. Do the same thing each time but quicker. Little time for quality checking and little or no team maintenance. They would work until they were finished or exhausted,

whichever came first.

A new team is born

The house-building project was an experience that engaged the group intellectually and emotionally, causing them to assess and change their behaviors and attitudes. Working together 'out of the box' enabled them to see their colleagues from a new perspective.

At the end many challenged their own cultural and other assumptions and were eager to make even greater changes to their business. The classroom reflection, feedback and teamwork process all contributed to the breakthrough thinking for reshaping. "This is not a program for the faint-hearted. You will be challenged and pushed out of your comfort zone. But if you are willing to pay the price, the outcomes will be richly rewarding," shared Tang Swee Seng, Vice President – Finance/IS.

There were no concessions for soft managers at Tabitha. The Baxter team worked in the same conditions and with the same tools as the resident teams. No ladders – nothing but saws, hammers and nails. No electricity, no toilet facilities, no special accommodation, no mosquito dusting beforehand.

"I was surprised to see a group of business people taking it so seriously and working so hard. They had no complaints about the conditions and rules, except when it came to getting their heads wet!" said Janne Ritskes. "Moreover they were the first team ever to complete their houses in less than the prescribed time." Getting their heads wet involved Janne herself dousing each participant with water on a regular basis as protection against the extreme heat!

A lasting foundation

Instead of a reactive arms-length financial donation, Baxter went into the community and built a genuine relationship with people they met and worked with.

No thought of reward? Well, yes. On all sides. The Baxter team took home not only a warm feeling

about a job well done but practical lessons to apply in their future relationships with each other and their own teams. The company expects to gain from the higher performing teams and more authentic leadership style that will challenge Baxter's future leaders.

"I wondered whether we had taken on too much, whether there was too much to address. But by the end of the five days we did 99% of what we set ourselves," concluded Alberto Bautista. "Now it's time for us to go forward and continue to make a difference for those people that depend upon our success."

Most importantly, the team took back a determination to make a lasting difference in their work and home lives. Mei hopes to take her team of managers to build houses in Cambodia later this year. Her fellow general managers in India and the Philippines are seeking opportunities for their teams to learn and grow through community projects in their own countries. Even the chef and food and beverage manager of the hotel where the team stayed and their local travel agent were inspired to get involved with future projects of their own. All of this is proof that one step out of the box can lead to many positive changes. The first step is the most difficult, sometimes even leaders need a push.

About the author

In 1998, Steve Morris founded Steve Morris Associates to coach leaders in Asia to respond to global economic and organizational challenges. Steve coaches and inspires chief executives and their teams within a multitude of cultures and industries to develop themselves and those around them to achieve personal goals, job satisfaction and business performance. He is one of a handful of coaches in Asia that specialize in helping leaders nurture and refine their command of the softer skills of people development and motivation.

About the company

International leadership consultancy Steve Morris Associates, the first dedicated leadership coaching company in Asia, coaches leaders in Asia to forge stronger teamwork at the top of the organization while fully developing employee potential. SMA designs and conducts leadership development and feedback programs that are linked to the achievement of business goals by working directly with employees at all levels.

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