

BUSINESS

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Firms work hard on togetherness

Bosses believe in racing sports cars, firewalking, public performances

By **Louis Aguilar**
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What some bosses will make you do to get motivated: walk on hot coals, audition in front of the entire company, climb a mountain, build a robot, play laser tag or drive a race car while blindfolded.

Having an energized workforce is the Holy Grail of business, and the pursuit of that goal can take a long and twisted path. Lately, the quest has led companies to "adventure/activity-based team building" — opportunities made available through a number of local enterprises:

■ Colorado Springs-based EmpowerU Corp. offers a setting where companies can have their workers walk across a bed of hot coals as a way to bond.

■ Denver-based Lazer Time allows grown men and women to play tag with laser guns.

■ Boulder-based Colorado Adventure Training hosts everything from mountain climbing and kayaking to hiking and biking treks.

Recently, John Metzger, the head of public relations firm Metzger Associates of Boulder, found another way to keep his executives in the zone: Let them race cars.

Metzger Associates was the first company to participate in a new corporate team building program offered by Boulder-based Go 4 It Racing Schools, a performance driving school started by Michael Pettiford, a professional race car driver.

"It was wonderful," Metzger said. "I've always believed in corporate team building, but this is the first program that I think can apply to businesses that deal with high-tech and Internet."

Metzger Associates specializes in working with such businesses.

"In race car driving, you learn how to move quickly, you learn how to constantly adjust to a new situation. Those are the goals of our business," Metzger said.

Thus, Metzger and five of his execu-

tives found themselves at Mountain View Motorsports in Mead a few weeks ago learning how to race Mazda Miata sports cars. Their first lesson included the executives driving blindfolded while one of their co-workers instructed them on the road ahead — all in the name of building trust.

"It was a good exercise in emphasizing the need to explain the most basic ideas of our work," said Jim Kendrick, senior account executive. "A lot of times explaining technology to a reporter or other staff, we forget to take a step back and explain the basics. It was quite enlightening."

Metzger's only regret was that he was not able to include more of his staff.

Unorthodox methods are also being applied to the hiring process at many companies.

Boulder-based Athene Software expects its potential employees to audition in front of the entire company, though only a few dozen of the company's 90 employees attend. The potential employee must perform some feat that demonstrates his or her personality and ability to do the desired job.

"Software engineers are not necessarily the most communicative people," said Eric Johnson, founder of Athene. "We want to hire the best. This is a way that makes sure we hire people who have the ability to interact with others."

One engineer brought in a robot he designed and used it to show



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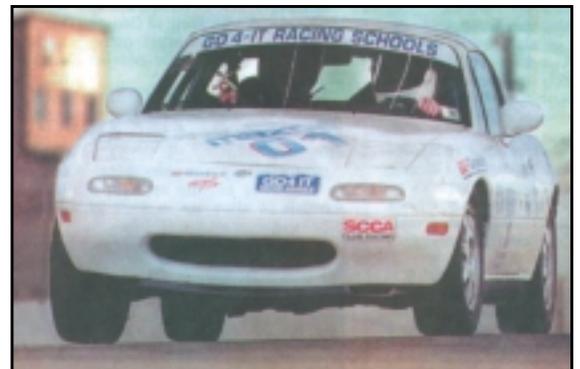
Above: Kristina Pfefferie of Metzger Associates put on her blindfold for a team-building exercise recently with co-worker Jim Kendrick at Boulder-based Go 4 It Racing Schools, which was started by professional race car driver Michael Pettiford.

steps he takes when trying to solve a problem. A quality control specialist used African drums to demonstrate the different approaches he might take to do his job. The multilayered rhythms of the drums represent the complex process of communication that takes place in a business, the specialist said. The audition was a perfect pitch: He was hired.

Occasionally, the applicant gets stage fright, in which case, Johnson allows the person a chance to regroup.

A handful of applicants have told Johnson they thought the idea was nuts.

"I told them I wish them the best of luck at another company," he said.



Above: Jim Kendrick (of Metzger Associates) takes the wheel while Pettiford guides him through the course at Boulder-based Go 4 It Racing Schools.