

Corporate lawyers walk over hot coals

CORPORATE 'retreats' – lots of fun and great ideas, yet little real value for the organisation? This model didn't fit the plans for Telecom's trans-Tasman legal team. This 'offsite' was specifically designed for teamwork, fun – and lasting benefit.

A core team of more than 30 lawyers meets the legal needs of Telecom, New Zealand's largest listed company which has a considerable Australian operation. As with other Australasian companies, an intensely competitive industry, regulatory challenge and a global downturn have combined to increase the need for legal input with an even greater pressure to reduce spending.

At Telecom, this was heightened by recent changes that resulted in few of the Australian and New Zealand lawyers having met each other. Many were new to Telecom, and several had started work with the company only the day before the planned 'offsite'. It was time to renew the team's sense of trans-Tasman collegiality and teamwork.



David Knight

Strategic approach

New Zealand General Counsel

David Knight says: "We've all been to corporate retreats that were great fun and generated excellent ideas, but which frankly didn't add much strategic value. Back at the office, everyone soon got back into 'business as usual', few people reviewed their notes, and fewer still ideas were actually implemented". He adds "We wanted people to have fun, to get to know each other and to enhance team cohesion. But we also wanted the offsite to complement key development objectives."

Australian General Counsel Craig Mulholland reinforces those remarks. "Each lawyer already adds great value to 'their' business unit, and the team in each country delivers value in its own jurisdiction, but real value to the organisation comes when all of its lawyers work together seamlessly, with a real understanding of the broader strategic issues. It's not just a bunch of specialists doing a great job as 'technical' lawyers, but a cohesive group adding real strategic value to the business."

David Knight and Craig Mulholland asked President of the Corporate Lawyers Association of New Zealand Ron Pol to help realise their aim.

"Ron has a passion for helping lawyers add value and for in-house and external counsel to work together to achieve exceptional results. He's been a Telecom lawyer himself, and is helping us

develop key practice management initiatives, so knows what makes us tick. He applied a level of creative flair that helped make this event especially memorable – as evident from the photos," Craig Mulholland said.

10-point plan

"Right from the outset, Ron challenged us about what we really wanted to achieve. He provided a 10-point plan that helped clarify our objectives, and then set about developing a programme to achieve them," David Knight said.

The programme wasn't just about delivering management's agenda. Telecom also sought participants' input.

Another aspect of the 10-point plan was to schedule a 'key ideas' workshop at the end of the conference, capturing good ideas and developing a framework to review and deploy the best ones. Combined with post-retreat workshops a month later, this avoided the common frustration of 'offsites' that fail to evaluate and implement great ideas. It also provided an opportunity for reflection and more in-depth discussion of key ideas.

Teamwork vital

With the pressures of restructuring, new relationships with external counsel and new team members, it was vital for participants to get to know each other right from the start.

However, it was felt that traditional "roundtable introductions" were likely only to induce group catatonia. Instead, a series of 'outdoor games' – delivered by a team from Wellington-based Paardekooper & Associates – served the important introductory function. They helped promote effective



Helping build trust and teamwork, trans-Tasman co-operation gets another team member through one of the remaining gaps in the 'spider web'.

teamwork based on mutual support, and were sufficiently low-impact as to be fun without being overshadowed by any need for physical prowess.

Mainstream 'business sessions' followed. The strategic vision for the legal group was explained, explored and shared. An interactive session followed keynote addresses from business unit managers, as heavy users of legal services.

The teamwork concept was extended beyond the in-house lawyers. Lawyers from Chapman Tripp and Russell McVeagh participated in selected sessions, each delivering interactive addresses on more effective ways of working with the in-house team to deliver services to the shared client. (Australian law firms were in the midst of a tendering process, so it was inappropriate to involve them).

The final session of the first day was entitled "Branding - the burning issue for team success". Its subtitle outlined "a facilitated course in specific branding fundamentals, expectation analysis and personal comfort zones". Translated, participants soon learnt that this meant "firewalking" - the team was confronted with a bed of hot coals, and an invitation to consider walking across them!

Firewalking is an individual pursuit, requiring considerable personal commitment. Yet it also requires teamwork -



Craig Mulholland, General Counsel Australia, accepts the challenge.

particularly support, encouragement and celebration of success by teammates. All of which were forthcoming, and then some!

Results were evident at dinner soon after. Not only was this co-sponsored by strong competitors Chapman Tripp and Russell McVeagh as a reflection of their commitment to teamwork, but the day's events also provided the spark for lively conversation.

Even before the second day's line-up, the group - many of whom had only just met - looked (and sounded) as if they'd been working together for years - with the added benefit of enthusiasm from a fresh team of committed professionals. **LT**