

Getting staff thumping to the same beat

ANDY MOORE

THE roar reverberates around the conference hall like the sound of a Black Watch battalion going into battle. Beat after beat reveals the drummers are engrossed in an activity they are deeply passionate about. They mean business.

"Whoops" and "Ows" are heard from the chief drummer, whipping the group into a frenzy of exhilaration and excitement.

No, this is not a company of soldiers practising for the Military Tattoo. Nor is it an African tribe performing a ceremonial war dance. The group gathered in the conference hall at Ayr Racecourse are employees from the Scottish Executive's Accountant in Bankruptcy department.

Their office in Kilwinning opened in early March. All 80 employees have assembled inside the hall on a snowy March morning to beat the living daylights out of African drums. Why?

Enter Drumming Up Business, an enterprise set up by (Chief) Suleman Chebe to boost motivation, morale and teambuilding in the workplace. The activity is by no means just another gimmick aimed at breathing life into a workforce. Far from it.

Founded in Glasgow three years ago, Drumming Up Business runs workshops across Scotland and the UK. The company can be described as innovative with a capital 'I'; inspiration came from Chebe's roots in his native Ghana.

Speaking to the man reveals a personality as big and fun as the business he runs. "I came here as a winter tourist ten years ago - we don't get much snow in Ghana!" he jokes. "I decided to introduce my native drumming techniques into Scottish organisations as a way of raising the spirits of people."

Through visiting schools and local organisations, Chebe realised his drumming is a platform that can strike a universal chord with employees of all ages, gender, and positions. With 350 drums at his disposal, he is no stranger to boosting morale and energy among large groups of workers.

The sessions, he says, are ideal for breaking the ice between new members of staff, opening and closing conferences, corporate away days, or internal teambuilding. Looking at its growing list of customers, Drumming Up Business is clearly doing something right. Employees from HBOS, Social Firms Scotland, North Lanarkshire Council, Unicef and the NHS are just a few who have given the drums a thorough thrashing.

The Executive staff are a good example of how the sessions help new employees build rapport. Most of the workers have only known each other for two weeks since the department opened in Kilwinning. However, looking at the group of today, it's as though they have known each other for two years, not two weeks.

The effects of hammering drums in fast and simple beats are not difficult to see from their faces and body language. Nonetheless, some of these workers' jobs involve dealing with people's miseries. Accountants beam with joy, IT staff look awe-struck, while administration workers shriek with laughter. It would be fair to argue that accounting in bankruptcy may lack a certain sparkle compared with some jobs. Such a sparkle, however, is not lost within the fast and exuberant drumming sessions delivered by Chebe and his team.

"One, two...to-geth-er," he cries, encouraging the employees to chant after him. "We, will, we will rock you," they chant back, clapping their hands between beating the drums. But they need no encouragement. All 80 staff members are putting their hearts and souls into the drumming as if their jobs or even their lives depended on it.

Marion McCormack, a deputy accountant for bankruptcy, explains the reasons for taking part.

"We decided to organise the drumming workshop so that staff could have fun and break the ice," she says. "The sessions are great for the new staff to interact and for energy to flow between a group of individuals."

Like most novel activities, fear of the unknown can bring an element of surprise to the uninitiated. From suited executives, who make high-level decisions, to receptionists, the sessions are an effective way of breaking down barriers. Similar to singing from the same song sheet, all employees hit the same drumbeats.

"Unlike some team-building schemes where people have a different level of commitment, the drumming sessions are universal," explains Chebe. "I have adapted the drum beats so they are simple to pick up - but they get faster to reach a crescendo. We're not teaching people how to drum, we're teaching people how to have fun."

A typical workshop lasts for about an hour, with Chebe and his team conducting sessions for groups of between 15 and 500. The secret behind the soul-stirring exercise is the Tampani drums and of course, the high energy and vigour of Chebe. These ingredients combine to create a magic formula for building confidence and rapport in the workplace.

"The drumming sessions are not what I expected and they certainly get the pulse going," enthuses Peter Hyslop, who works in the insolvency department. "I was a little sceptical before I got here, although I can now see the sessions are excellent at boosting morale and team work."

Team-building, motivational coaching; call it what you will, these buzz words are just descriptions according to Chebe. It's all about feeling the rhythm, he insists.

To no lesser extent, the Executive staff have to be motivated: some of them had to get up at the crack of dawn to be there and drive to Ayr through snow.

The last thing employees wanted was to participate in mind-numbing team-building exercises. Mind numbing is an alien term to Drumming Up Business.

"The sessions don't present any barriers to people and are easy and fun to participate in," says Chebe. "Ultimately, many of the employers I have visited have given almost 99 per cent participation and feedback."

He even goes as far to say that, for some individuals, the drumming sessions are a life-changing experience, allowing them to adopt a completely novel form of music from a different culture.

One of the company's largest client employers was a legal firm in London where 3,000 people took part in sessions. This project lasted for three months and involved staff from all levels, including cleaners and company big wigs.

The team also undertakes development work for groups of employees who need to progress up a career ladder and have to deal with a changing job role.

"Leadership and interaction between staff is all about trust," asserts Chebe. "When trust between staff diminishes they can feel very low. In order to regain the high, the trust needs to be restored. The workshops can help achieve this."

But the company is doing more than just drumming up business in the UK. Looking ahead, the team will work with a pharmaceutical company in Romania, taking the drumming onto an international stage. Alongside visits to employers, the company also runs a drop-in centre once a month.

As well as the team-building and motivational benefits, the sessions can also help combat stress. Chebe believes drumming is a flexible and cost-effective way of dealing with employee stress, one of the biggest forms of workplace absenteeism. According to the Chartered Institute of Personal Development (CIPD), stress accounts for 60 per cent of the 6.5 million working days lost every year in Britain, creating an annual bill of £13 billion for UK industry.

Back at the conference centre, Chebe has whipped the employees up into even more of a frenzy. Such is the level of enthusiasm from the drummers, they need a break so their hands can have a rest.

"Che-che-ku-lae," calls Chebe after the break. This translates to "Are you having fun?"

You can tell by the look on their faces the question doesn't need an answer.