

African drums give rhythm to corporate training

PARIS - African drums, for centuries a means of communicating a birth to a nearby village, celebrating a wedding or part of the grieving ritual at funerals, have found a new role - corporate training.

Find out if you can multi-task, deal with change or whether you are a leader or follower by drumming with colleagues.

Sound surprising? Well, Doug Manuel, who set up "Sewa Beats" in Lausanne, Switzerland in 2000, said traditional African drumming was an effective tool for 21st century learning.

"I think one of the reasons why it's so powerful is that drumming is very primal so it brings people back to themselves," the 34-year-old Briton said.

"It shifts energy very, very quickly in a way that other art forms in business are not going to do."

Corporations have long sent their employees on outdoor pursuits but African drumming is another way to encourage team building and leadership training, Manuel said ahead of a pre-dinner session for 65 executives at a restaurant on the outskirts of Paris.

Seated in a semi-circle with their suit jackets hung on the backs of their chairs, the employees of IBM and BMC Software seemed excited though unsure what to expect.

Three "animators" kicked off the workshop with a lively warm-up, before getting them into the swing of synchronised rhythm, together stepping side-to-side with "call and response" chanting.

Then began the drumming, undisciplined and unmusical at first, participants were encouraged to bang as hard as they could - and they did - before beginning to tap in slow unison.

Soon they were jiggling in their seats, having mastered a rhythmic beat with the whole room bouncing to the contagious deep thud of 60-odd African drums, picking up the tempo.

"As you play, don't forget to breathe!" Manuel reminded them as they responded to his instructions with gusto, picking up the pace and playing more complicated sequences.

Drumming sessions have lasted from 18 minutes to four hours, and up to 1,000 people can take part in the workshops. Programmes are tailor-made for clients who tend to be business schools and companies. Sometimes they just want an "ice breaker" for a conference.

But often a company will say, for example, that they have three different departments that do not work well together although they work alright alone, Manuel said.

"In that instance what we do is we split them into three groups, we would teach each group a different thing that doesn't really make any sense on its own," he said.

"It's only when all three groups come together, and there's a moment of discovery," he added.

A participant can discover a lot about his or her leadership skills, or lack of them, from standing in the middle of the drummers and leading the music, Manuel said, adding: "Sometimes they panic and clearly get very nervous."

Corinne Chabris, who was instrumental in arranging the session for BMC Software and IBM, said it was not the first time they had tried African drumming.

"They learnt to play together, to get to know each other and at the end of the day to agree. That's the benefit of this activity - it's not an individual game but a group one," she said.

The drums, made in Burkina Faso, are the traditional instruments with a wood shell, rope, metal rings and a goat skin cover, and were shipped over from the West African country.

A former BBC production manager, Manuel gave up his job to follow his passion for drumming to West Africa and on his return six months later began running African drumming classes for refugee children and inmates at a high-security prison.

But it wasn't until doing sessions for student music therapists that he realised the training potential in drumming, so he re-mortgaged his home, took coaching courses and initially bought 30 drums. He now owns about 900.

Marie-Odile Crinon, who heads a team of about 300 people at IBM, said after the session that it underscored basic management principles of teaching everyone to work towards the same objective and vision.

BMC Software Account Manager Francois Volpoet also enjoyed the drumming.

"That can show that when there are discordant sounds, you manage to do something by listening to each other," he said afterwards.

"Sewa Beats" - Sewa means 'Joy' in Malinke, the native language of the region in West Africa where the inspiration for the drumming originates - also has offices in London, Madrid and Copenhagen and has run drumming sessions for business professionals throughout Europe and in Dubai.

Costs depend on the mandate but Manuel said one session could cost anything from just over E1,000 to E32,000.

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http://www.drummingsa.co.za/african_drums.htm

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