

Engage Asia with Paul Keijzer

Leadership Outbreak

The Team Building Accelerator



Paul Keijzer

The Experience of Leadership Outbreak

It was 2002 I was on a plane from Ho Chi Minh City to Kuala Lumpur where the then President of Unilever Asia, [Tex Gunning](#) had invited 225 senior leaders from across Asia for a Leadership Outbreak. I didn't know it then, but I was about to take part in a corporate retreat that would change my life forever.

I didn't have a clue what to expect since the only thing we were told was the time we should arrive to the recently opened Kuala Lumpur airport and a list of stuff to bring. I was puzzled. What was this so-called Leadership Outbreak all about? All we were told was to be ready in the morning for our next flight. The next day 225 business leaders were confused and complaining. What is this? What are we going to do? What is this all about? We boarded a plane to Sarawak, and then get on a much smaller plane to Mulu in the heart of the Serawak jungle.

I remember complaining to my colleague sitting next to me – I kept thinking we could have invested the money for this journey into growing our businesses. However, what unfolded over the next few days had a profound effect on me. 225 business leaders from more than 15 different countries were hiking, canoeing, visiting the famous Mulu caves, discussing, conversing, participating in village life and partying together.

What You Can Achieve With a Leadership Outbreak

Even a group as large as 225 people came closer together. The smaller groups in which we shared lifelines, talked about our aspirations, built bridges and had powerful conversations immediately become stronger teams with a strong emotional and intellectual commitment to each other and our collective goals.

One of the pioneers in designing Leadership Outbreak's [Erik Jan de Rooij](#), from [Amaseu](#) (he partnered with Tex on many of his [journey's](#)) says:

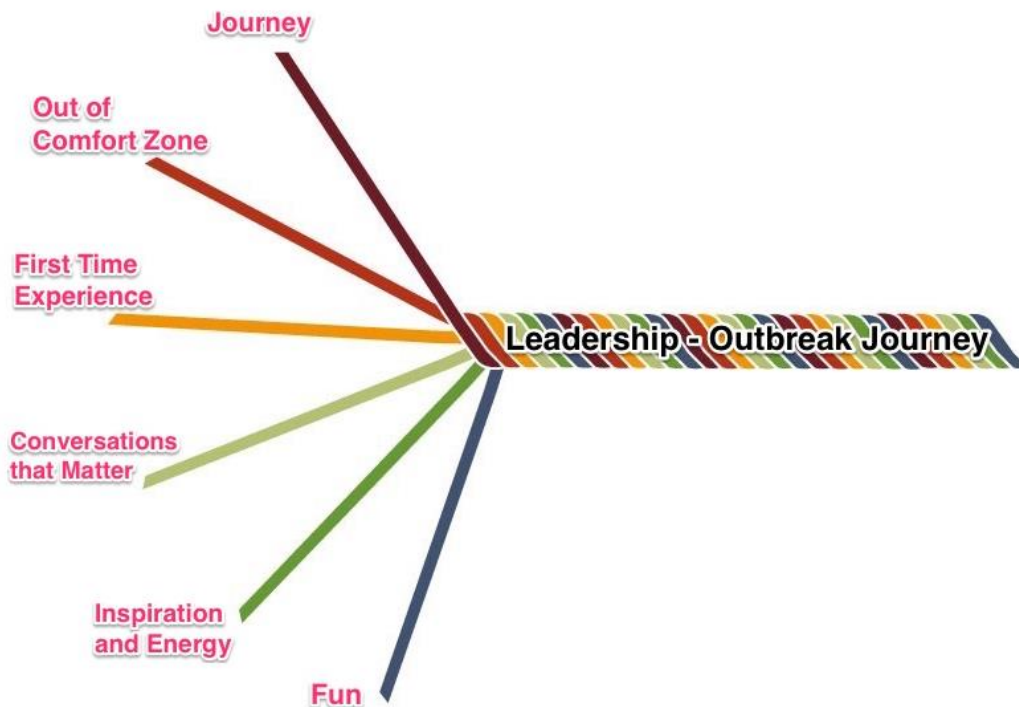
A leadership outbreak [is] a journey that promotes peak performance designed to provide an unforgettable, lasting and profound learning experience.

I have participated in Outbreak Leadership journey's in Vietnam and Pakistan with Unilever. And here's the thing about Outbreaks – they're far more intense than the standard corporate retreat. Through these experiences I have been able to design and facilitate Leadership Outbreaks in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Thailand, Oman and Bangladesh. Based on Tex and Erik's pioneering work I have used Leadership Outbreaks to help new teams coming together in a much shorter time than would normally be expected to:

- Resolve dysfunctional behavior in leadership teams
- Align teams around their joint aspirations
- Help leaders to accelerate team performance

The Key Components of a Leadership Outbreak

I find that the most effective Leadership Outbreaks weave together 6 different strands to create a leadership team learning event that has profound impact on a personal level and a transformational impact on a group level.



6 Key Components of a Leadership Outbreak

The Journey of the Leadership Outbreak

I've used the same concepts that had an impact on me from my first leadership outbreak to transform leadership teams and their business. The concept behind the Leadership Outbreak is to:

1. Take teams on a journey
2. To take them out of their comfort zone
3. Give them as many first time experiences as possible

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These are the first 3 factors which intertwine the 6 Key Components above that are required to facilitate conversations about topics that matter.

The Spectacular Results

Whatever the goal, the leadership outbreak is a team building intervention that creates spectacular results. I've shared incredible successes with leaders in different industries including:

- A CEO of a telecom leadership team used their journey to launch the transformation of the company, expanding its footprint into financial services and media.
- The leader of a struggling joint venture, where relations had frayed used the outbreak to reset and rebuild them.
- A newly appointed CEO of company that was recently acquired used the outbreak to build deep and profound relations within his team.

What Makes Leadership Outbreaks Unique

What's the fuzz I hear you say? Well the fuzz is that unlike many other team building exercises or even outward bound exercises, the purpose of the leadership outbreak is to create a context where a team can reflect, rejuvenate, fight, collaborate, co-create on their business and the collaboration that is needed to achieve their aspirations.

The difference with indoor workshops or trainings events is that whilst these events can also be impactful it most often does not produce deep behavioral shifts in people. Most people will feel stimulated through



Angkor Wat - Cambodia



Musandam – Oman

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workshops however it rarely leads to personal or team transformation. Outward bound training activities are different in a way that, although people enjoy the refreshing and stimulating experience, it often lacks a direct connect with the workplace and the translation to performance improvement at the workplace is frequently missing.

A Leadership Journey offers both; it is an experience that requires physically exercise, offers intellectual stimulation and emotional richness. And at the same time it has a very strong link to the vision and results that the team needs to deliver.

The Journey

One of the design elements of an Outbreak is to actually make a *real journey* from somewhere to somewhere. This serves as a metaphor for our own larger leadership and team journeys.

In this the participants are taken on a trip of several days through an *inspiring landscape and stimulating cultural experiences*. Along the way, the aim is to interact with the local environment and the community, learn from the world around us and wherever possible use opportunities to give back to the communities in which we live.

A big part of the value of the journey is *surprise*. Participants normally are not aware of the details of the journey, nor its destination. This heightens the group dynamics and increases the power of the experience, unfolding step by step, as every journey in life.

5 Secrets to Successful Leadership Outbreaks

Tuckman, Scott Peck and all the other sages of team development agree that in order for a team to get into any stages of high performance they have to go through a stage of 'storming', 'pseudo community' or 'emptying'. Leadership Outbreaks are designed to accelerate this process by taking people out of their comfort zone.

To successfully do this without turning people completely off and achieving the very important goal of team alignment there are 5 other strands to take into consideration. Here's a brief on each one of them.

5 SECRETS TO SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP OUTBREAKS

- 1 Out of the Comfort Zone
- 2 First Time Experiences
- 3 Conversations through Community Circles
- 4 Fun
- 5 Inspiration and Energy

1. Out of the Comfort Zone

One element to achieve this is through the earlier element of surprise. Participants of Leadership Outbreak Journey's don't know where they're going, what they're going to be doing, where they'll be eating or where they'll be sleeping. This not only forces people into communion but also to let go. At the same time it allows the facilitator loads of flexibility to adjust the program to the ever changing needs of the group.

It's not only mental discomfort that accelerates people to open up but also physical discomfort which plays a role in this. Certainly many senior executives have never slept in a tent, shared a room with a colleague or did their private business in the most primitive conditions.

I don't believe in discomfort for the sake of discomfort and trying to push the physical boundaries to 'teach people an important lesson' during the leadership outbreak (there are other programs that aim to this for a special reason). No. The discomfort level should be highest at the start of the journey and improve over time. My favorite journey's end with a night in a nice resort on a Sri Lankan or Malaysian beach!

2. First Time Experiences

First time experiences are created to:

1. Get people out of their comfort zone,
2. Create a bond between members about something special they've shared together
3. Create moments that allow team members to talk about for years to come.

I try to make these first time experiences as physical as possible in which an individual is pushed to the limit and does things he/she would never have done that without the support of the team they're sharing these experiences with. Some of my favorite first experiences on Outbreak Journeys have been:

3. Conversations through Community Circles

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Camel Ride – Cholistan Desert



Hiking in Gawadar



Reflection in the Sand Dunes of the Balochi Coast



Hang Gliding

What really make the Leadership Outbreak a transformational event are the conversations that are braided with traveling and activities. The conversations relate back to the context of why the team is there, the aspirational goal they have set out to achieve or the relations they need to build in order to achieve these goals.

The conversations always take place in a 'community circle' and are kicked off by the facilitator asking a question that would further the topic the teams wants to address. The community circles have the standard rules as every circle:

- Reflect
- Speak whenever you want to speak
- Open up
- Listen to understand
- Build on what others are saying
- Listen for emerging trends

These conversations are the heart of the Leadership Outbreak and true transformations takes place during these sessions. Whether you are doing a personal life line or a mask exercise, a discussion on the interpersonal issues that teams are facing or how to overcome certain restrictions or obstacles as a team, the setting, the context, the journey, the first time experiences all contribute to having a depth in conversations that would never be possible in the office.

4. Fun

Towards the end of the Leadership Outbreak you will find a spirit, excitement and energy in the team that's difficult to replicate. Fun

and laughter is the glue that holds teams together and brings them to a next level.

Creating moments in which a team can relax, play and connect at a different level is as important as any of the other threads that make the outbreak such a strong and powerful intervention.

5. Inspiration and Energy

All the different components of the Leadership Outbreak inspires and energizes people. They come back to the workplace rejuvenated. Team members of people who attend Outbreaks are often curious about what happened “out there” since boundaries between departments seem to vanish, issues between leadership team members disappear and a new kind of unity appear.

Keeping the Spirit of the Outbreak Alive

One health warning though: your truly transformational team intervention is only as good as how you keep it alive in the workplace. An Outbreak will profoundly change people and teams, it will start a transformation process where teams connect and commit to each other. That commitment will transcend back in the organization, delivering results from day 1.

The key is figuring out how to sustain that momentum. Leaders that embark on the journey in the illusion that all problems will be solved and that the Outbreak is the solution are often disappointed when I speak to them 6 months upon return.

The Postcard Commitment

Another key in the build up to the journey is getting a commitment from team leaders on what they will do after the outbreak. To build personal commitment from each of the Outbreak participants I often close with the ‘Postcard’ exercise. In this I hand out a postcard of the destination we visited and ask them to address it to themselves and on the ‘message side’ write down their personal action they want to commit upon return. I then collect the postcards and send them to the participants a month after they have completed the journey. In doing so I personalize the action and create a ‘memory moment’ one month down the line.

As a Leadership Transformer I love Leadership Outbreaks. They allow me to do what I love most: transforming leadership teams whilst doing crazy activities in the most beautiful settings in this world and sharing that with others.

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[Paul Keijzer](#) is the CEO and Managing Partner of Engage Consulting in Malaysia, Pakistan and U.A.E. He focuses on transforming top teams and managing talent across Asia's emerging and frontier markets. Paul has a firm belief that outstanding results can only be achieved through people, by engaging teams and building commitment by creating a new paradigm between company and employee. Paul has delivered transformational interventions for more than 50 blue chip organizations in countries across Asia including Malaysia, Singapore, Korea, Fiji, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Egypt, Korea, U.A.E. and India. For more transformational leadership, signup to [Engage Asia with Paul Keijzer](#).

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