2026 Team Building Trends: Executive Summary

Navigating Economic Turbulence and Uncertainty

by Anne Thornley-Brown, President, Executive Oasis International

The Context

2026 will demand sharper strategic alignment than any recent year with seismic shifts in the global geopolitical landscape, tariff policy uncertainty, and economic turbulence.

Fuelling this climate is the ripple effect of:

- elections in over three dozen countries in 2026
- U.S. reciprocal tariffs, a moving target, levied against over 30 countries
- conflicts in Latin America (most recently Venezuela), Europe and the Middle East expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

Add to that the aftermath of natural disasters. There has recently been:

- forest fires and flooding in Canada and the USA
- a severe hurricane in Jamaica
- natural disasters ranging from hurricanes to cyclones to earthquakes to volcanic eruptions to severe monsoons in The Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. Recovery will take an economic toll.

The Good News

The good news is that from Canada and the USA to Asia, Europe, and The Middle East, national economies were more resilient than projected for 2025

For 2026, executives can navigate uncertainty with strategic clarity, intent, and action.

2026 Team Building Trends

Navigating Economic Turbulence and Uncertainty

To provide a framework for addressing these challenges, we are pleased to unveil our 2026 team building trends.

As in previous years, our projections for 2026 team building trends represent both best practices to maximize bottom line impact and pitfalls to avoid.

1. Business Team Building Simulations
2. Facilitated strategy sessions and meetings.
3. Artificial Intelligence (AI)
4. Giving Back to the Community
5. Hybrid Team Building

Pitfalls to Avoid

6. Mandating Return to Office Without Collaboration
7. Shelving Team Building
8. Putting play Before performance.
9. Last Minute Planning and Delayed Decision-Making
10. Increased Red Tape

Anne Thornley-Brown, MBA, is the Forbes-featured founder and President of Toronto-based Executive Oasis International. She has been a LinkedIn Top Voice since 2024.

Anne has travelled to 14 countries to serve clients from 19 countries including Jamaica, Barbados, Dominica, USA, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Executive Oasis International designs and facilitates meetings, strategy sessions, executive retreats, and team building. Unlike most simulations that rush debriefs, we devote at least 25–33% of the session on debriefing and application, ensuring insights stick and scale.

To explore how Executive Oasis International can help your team navigate economic turbulence and uncertainty and thrive, please schedule a brief discovery call on Zoom:

go.oncehub.com/annethornleybrown

Team Building Trends for 2026

by Anne Thornley-Brown, MBA
President, Executive Oasis Internation

To seize opportunities in the dynamic environment the world is currently experiencing, it's essential for executives to:

- keep abreast of trends
- engage in course correction
- navigate change and turbulence
- diversify supply chains and the customer base

As EY's Global CEO recently noted:

"…uncertainty is going to be the norm."

"*Leaders today must organize their teams not just to react — but to execute with confidence even when the outside world shifts."*

SOURCE: Bloomberg

1. Business Team Building Simulations

Facilitated business team building simulations can help executives create a shared playbook for:

- facilitate strategic brainstorming
- accelerate decision-making
- improve execution velocity
- foster innovation

How Business Simulations Drive Results

A strategic and targeted approach ensures effectiveness.

- An executive frames the business context
- The facilitator connects the simulation directly to your organization's reality.
- Customized simulations:
  - ❑ immerse teams in realistic parallel universe reflecting your organizational realities
  - ❑ equip participants with a shared toolkit

- A structured debrief translates insights from the simulation into action
- Reconfigured teams tackle real business challenges with fresh alignment and tools
- The teams present their proposed solutions
- Executives develop an implementation plan with specific actions

As expertly facilitated team building delivers significant bottom line results, executives can no longer afford to treat it as an annual event.

Business Simulations for Times of Economic Turbulence & Uncertainty

- ❑ **Visexecutaries: Seizing Opportunities in our Shifting Corporate Landscape**
- ❑ **Lemons to Lemonade: Squeezing Opportunities out of Adversity When Business Goes Sour**

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2. Facilitated strategy sessions and meetings.

The World Economic Forum's 2026 Global Risks Report surveyed over 1,300 global leaders and experts to list their top short-term fears. "Geoeconomic confrontation" topped the list as the most pressing risk over the next two years, followed by misinformation and disinformation, then societal polarization.

When environments are volatile, executives must ensure their teams:

- are fully aligned in direction
- communicate without barriers
- implement strategy with speed and clarity

To be effective, don't approach team building as an annual event. Bi-monthly strategy sessions can help executive teams stay on track and on course.

"The survey captures perspectives from political leaders, CEOs and experts charged with shaping policy and setting corporate strategy, not general public opinion.".

SOURCE: Entrepreneur

The Conference Board's latest survyey of C-suite executives is full of signs that the private sector is worried about politics, especially in the US....

Only cyberattacks and (here it is again) uncertainty emerged as bigger security concerns among US leaders.

SOURCE: Bloomberg

3. Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Since the advent of ChatGPT in November, 2022, the growth of AI has been unprecedented. It has impacted every aspect of business in ways that no one anticipated. It may be more of a game changer than the Internet. AI and, in fact, implementation of all technology has an impact on teams. The implementation process is not always smooth and benefits don't accrue immediately.

The World Economic has highlighted several employee and team related risks of AI. In addition to these risks consider:

- Employees with concerns about technology replacing their jobs may sabotage of implementation efforts.
- Loss of control.
- Erosion of human creativity

AI is being used to create everything from images to art to TV commercials. If this trend continues, human creativity may take a hit at a time when it is important for organizations to foster innovation

"The top three risks in order are:

- *Employees may not adapt or upskill quickly enough to keep pace with new technologies.*
- *Fears of career stagnation and skill atrophy due to the over-reliance on AI.*
- *Ethical and data privacy concerns.*

Source: World Economic Forum

There are also ethical concerns about AI. Mention AI in business circles and the message is "Hop aboard now or soon you'll be so far behind your business won't be able to compete. In arts circles, the sentiments is decidedly anti-AI. To train AI models, companies scraped **billions** of copyrighted images and hundreds of thousand books from pirate sites. The artists and writers received no compensation for their intellectual property.

Some lawsuits by writers have been settled. Disney filed a lawsuit and eventually reached a licensing agreement with Open AI. There are many lawsuits still before the court. If they prevail judgements could bankrupt some companies. Are we in the midst of an AI bubble that will burst with major economic fallout. Only time will tell.

Eric Schmidt, co-founder of Google, cautioned that, within a few years, AI could takeover by inventing its own language that humans can't understand. His advice is “Pull the plug now!” This could be Sci-fi or perhaps he has a point.

There is no doubt that AI can be incorporated into team building, executive retreats, and strategy sessions. Every executive must weigh the benefits and risks.

“Adverse outcomes from AI technologies are seen as a longer-term threat rather than an immediate danger.

Source: Entrepreneur

Alternatives to Consider

If your organization is using or considering the use of AI here are some things to consider.

Be transparent Reassure employees and keep them in the loop.

To reduce stress and discouragement, provide plenty of support when introducing new technology. This is not the time for a sink or swim approach.

Don’t be quick to chase this shiny object and all of the related emerging platforms without weighing the risks and benefits/

Incorporate artificial intelligence into team building. It can be used for brainstorming, analysis, to generate an action plan, and to pull together presentations to with team recommendations.

If AI is new to your team, keep it simple. If you want to go deeper, then our about hybrid platforms applies. Familiarize team members with the tools and platforms you want to use prior to the session.

Have a back-up plan in case AI implodes.

4. Giving Back to the Community Through Team building with Charity Components.

With so many natural disasters around the globe, organizations can build goodwill by giving back. Whether it's providing backpacks filled with supplies for students or the homeless, through initiatives to help recovery from natural disasters and severe weather, companies can give back to the community. When incorporated into business simulations, companies can improve team and cross-functional effectiveness.

It all comes down to the design. For example, a few weeks before hurricane Melissa, I designed and facilitated an executive strategy session that included a backpack challenge. A local school benefited from not only donated backpacks but and shoes for one of the students, and extension cords for the teachers.

5. Hybrid Team Building

While some jurisdictions and organizations are mandating return to office, hybrid work will continue in others for the foreseeable future.

Despite the return to office push, many organizations still operate with hybrid or remote teams. There will be circumstances in which authorities may again mandate work from home.

It makes sense to deliver team building in a hybrid format that replicates the environment in which teams are operating. Since this is the environment in which they must generate results, it makes sense to offer team building in a hybrid format.

Rain lashed Dubai and the northern emirates on Thursday, causing isolated flooding and some disruption on the roads.

Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed, Crown Prince of Dubai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, said employees of all entities affiliated with the Dubai government have been instructed to work remotely, with the exception of essential personnel.

Sheikh Hamdan encouraged the private sector to activate the same measure to ensuring safety.

Source: The National

The benefit is that team members from all around the world can connect and improve team effectiveness. Also, it's possible to bring in an expert facilitator from anywhere in the world. Hybrid team building can be delivered at a fraction of the cost of face-to-face.

An effective approach is to use hybrid team building for the initial sessions. Then, bring the team together face-to-face. Hybrid team building can then be used for follow-up. There are a number of platforms available to add the fun factor with avatars. They can replicate just about any environment to reflect your theme. Platforms with avatars include Virtway, OpenSim, Meta Horizon, and even Second Life. For a long time, some leaders who were eager to chase the latest shiny object viewed Second Life as out of date. During the pandemic it made a comeback.

Hybrid team building is not about the platform. It should still incorporate all phases of effective team building including executive briefing, facilitator briefing, facilitated business simulation, debriefing, and business application exercises. Familiarize team members with the platform in advance. They shouldn't be struggling to master the platform while participating in team building.

Team Building Pitfalls to Avoid

6.Mandating Return to Office Without Collaboration

Think discussions about work from home vs return to office are yesterday's news? In Canada, they are very much "in the news". Authorities in the United Arab Emirates have just ordered work from home due to severe rainfall. (Recall that in April, 2024, there was unprecedented rainfall triggering flooding in UAE

Effective January 5, 2026, many public and private sector workers were ordered back to work full-time. This was despite the fact that 60% of Canadian workers surveyed indicated a preference for organizations with more flexible work arrangements. Work from home was never intended to be permanent but many workers now prefer it.

It's ironic that the same governments that ordered work from home in the first place are now reversing course.

"Thousands of public, private sector workers will be working from the office again in 2026We several provinces, including Manitoba, British Columbia and New Brunswick, retain more flexible hybrid work rules, others are reviewing their policies.

Several banks — including BMO, Scotiabank and RBC — have already told their staff to increase their office presence to four days per week.

Other private-sector companies are also making changes to their policies.

Provincial and federal public sector unions have pushed back against return-to-office mandates."

SOURCE: CBC News

RTO mandates will have a detrimental impact on employees who moved away from areas accessible to downtown cores during the pandemic. Many moved to smaller, family-friendly communities with more affordable housing. Now they face long commutes that will erode the very balance they were seeking.

Return to office mandates may backfire. Talented employees who have options may opt for organizations with more flexibility. Workers with fewer options are to "quit and stay". In other words, engage in what has become known as "quiet quitting".

An Alternative to Consider One size does not fit all. A more prudent course of action would be to collaborate with employees to design win-win working arrangements.

Incorporate discussions about preferred working arrangements into the performance review process. Consider the needs and preferences of team members when formulating WRH/RTO policies. Get creative. A cross-functional team with employees from all levels may be able to generate a customized approach that will yield better results than a mandate.
Facilitated meetings, strategy sessions, and executive retreats can help leadership teams as they navigate RTO in a way that preserves trust, corporate culture, and performance.

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7. Shelving Team Building

In an effort to stretch budgets, continue companies will continue to shelve team building due to the believe that it involves an off-site. This is due the misconception that executive retreats and team buiilding have to involve a stay at a luxury resort.

An Alternative to Consider

To stretch the budget and still maximize benefits of off-sites, use an executive's residence or cottage, the party room of a condo, a community centre, or a church. Consider swapping venues with a supplier for one or more days. Use their meeting room and allow them to use yours.

Obtain quality cuisine from the culinary school at your local college rather than a 5 star resort or gourmet restaurant.

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8. Putting Play Before Performance.

Even though the challenges of 2025 were significant, many companies continued to put the emphasis on social activities and play days. This is expected to continue in 2026 which economists project as another year of economic turbulence

Team socials and recreation have an important place on the corporate agenda. Particularly when team members have worked hard and produced results against all odds, it's important to celebrate, reward top performers and express appreciation to top tier clients.

Business simulations that address organization of challenges can and can include fun factor. The difference is that they are designed to generate business results and not strictly a day of recreation.

Recreation and play days can seem like a quick fix but at best they offer Band-Aid solutions when organizations are facing a significant challenges. We can learn from the demise of companies like Wework and Seagate that put the emphasis on play over performance.

Here's the good news. With changes in leadership and executives who put their emphasis in the right places, it is possible for organizations to bounce back.

Examples:

- Wework's recovery after a failed IPO and post-bankruptcy turnaround
- Seagate's banner performance in 2025 after experiencing years of pressure, particularly between 2012 and 2016.

An Alternative to Consider

Prioritize performance over play. Team socials and recreation have a place on the corporate agenda. Particularly when team members have worked hard and produced results against all odds, it's important to celebrate, reward top performers, and express appreciation to top tier clients.

When organizations face significant challenges, it is far more important to pull the team together, address them head on, and generate solutions. This can be accomplished through facilitated strategy sessions, meetings, and business team building. There will be plenty of time to play when performance is heading in the right direction.

Business team building simulations that address organizational challenges can include the fun factor. The difference is that they are designed to generate business results, not strictly as play days.

9. Last Minute Planning and Delayed Decision-Making

Some executives view delaying decisions, including facilitator and consultant selection, as a risk-management strategy.

Stalled executive decision-making is due to:

- Economic and geopolitical uncertainty
- Unpredictable project pipelines

"A “significantly elevated” level of economic and geopolitical uncertainty is causing business leaders to hold off on hiring consultants for some new projects, according to the IT consulting and outsourcing group Accenture."

SOURCE: Financial Times

These pressures are real but hesitation has consequences:

- Projects lose momentum
- Teams operate without critical expertise
- Competitors who move faster seize opportunities while delayed decisions result in missed opportunities.

In practice, delay becomes a team-building pitfall as indecision:

- Slows transformation
- Weakens execution velocity

For team building initiatives, delayed decisions are costly leading to:

- errors and flawed execution due to
- reduced time for planning
- difficulty in sourcing venues within the scope of your budget as space will be limited and at a premium
- a skyrocketing budget due to higher airfares and hotel rates

The issue isn’t whether to manage risk. It’s recognizing that indecision carries its own risks. Yes, risk management matters. but so does momentum.

Effective leaders view consultants as a strategic partners. Selecting a consultant is not a procurement task. Instead, it balances uncertainty against the urgency of execution.

An Alternative to Consider

Rather than leaving planning until the last minute, begin the process at least two months in advance. (In fact, with uncertainty around oil price heightened by developments in Venezuela, there could be some volatility in the cost of aircraft fuel. It's best to lock in more favourable airfares early.)

Don't select your dates until there has been an opportunity to scope out hotel rates and airfares. Pick your dates out of the air and you could end up with higher prices due to a national holiday in a source country or special event or conference in town.

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10. Increased Red Tape

There are a number of dynamics contributing to the increase in red tape when engaging team building consultants and other suppliers.

The first is the economic climate of uncertainty that fuels the indecision and aversion to risk we have already discussed. Understandably, leaders want to ensure that they have sufficient funds to meet all obligations. If they are uncertain of the benefits consultants and team building facilitators deliver, they will want to scrutinize all supplier engagement decisions The consulting fee is just part of the budget. Sometimes, travel and accommodation also come into play. Even if the meeting or executive retreat is held locally, there's still the opportunity cost of having senior leaders away from day-to-day operations.

The Advent of Procurement

The increased role of procurement in engaging consultants is a result of the function's evolution from a purely transactional role to a strategic business partner, a trend that gained significant momentum in the early 2010s.

The shift is driven by a desire for greater cost control, transparency, risk management, and strategic alignment of external service spending with core business goals. Instead of individual departments hiring consultants independently (often leading to "maverick spending", central procurement teams provide an organization-wide view of spending. They apply professional sourcing methodologies. Procurement's due diligence is intended to mitigate risk and ensure sound selection.

The Downside to Procurement

The downside is that the procurement process can increase red tape and reduce innovation. The process can fuel a risk averse culture with overly prescriptive rules, and lengthy administrative procedures. These procedures are designed primarily for accountability and cost minimization rather than value and outcomes.

A rigorous procurement process can result in overkill due to:

- **Complex and Burdensome Documentation:** The process often requires extensive paperwork and detailed documentation at every stage to ensure compliance and audit readiness. This consumes valuable time and resources for both the procuring entity and potential suppliers, creating administrative burdens.
- **Multiple Layers of Approval:** To mitigate risk and ensure transparency, purchases often require navigating numerous internal and external approval layers, which causes significant delays and slows down the acquisition of goods and services.
- **Rigid, Sequential Processes:** Many traditional processes follow a "waterfall" approach, where each step must be completed before the next can begin (e.g., planning, tendering, evaluation, contracting). This sequential nature is inflexible and makes it difficult to adapt to changing needs or market dynamics, in contrast to more agile methodologies.
- **Overly Prescriptive Specifications**: Tenders often feature extremely detailed and narrow technical specifications based on existing products. This "box-checking" approach inadvertently disqualifies vendors who might offer innovative, outcome-based solutions that don't fit the exact template.
- **Lack of Flexibility:** The emphasis on strict adherence to established rules limits the discretion of procurement officers to make strategic decisions or adapt to unique project needs, further entrenching bureaucracy.

Some of what is perceived as excessive red tape comes from the need to mitigate risk.

In the past, team building consultants dealt with the executive engaging their services and accounts payable. With procurement playing an increasingly important role, the RFQ process has become much more complicated.

Public sector organizations need to be highly risk-averse. Leaders who are accountable for the management of the public purse are keenly aware of the intense scrutiny and potential punitive sanctions for failure.

This steers decision-makers toward "safe," tried-and-tested incumbent suppliers and off-the-shelf solutions, rather than novel or unproven ideas.

Prime Minister Mark Carney wants Canada to build. But for that to happen, 2026 needs to be the year of cutting red tape. The country's high regulatory burden has long held back business investment and economic growth, and it's only gotten worse over time. Despite two separate red-tape reduction initiatives, the number of federal regulations is up 37 per cent since 2006 and has grown nearly twice as fast in recent years as in the U.S.

Mr. Carney is trying to change this. Every federal department and agency is reviewing regulations for inefficiencies, and a new Red Tape Reduction Office will oversee the process. What really matters, though, is results. The review will only be meaningful if the regulatory burden actually declines. If it doesn't, we're not likely to reignite investment in Canada.

Source: The Globe and Mail

How Procurement Can Kill Innovation

An overly stringent procurement process stifles innovation by:

- **Fuelling a Risk Aversion Culture:** Tried and true tends to win out over innovation
- **Discouraging New Suppliers:** Complex pre-qualification criteria, high up-front costs, and a perceived bias toward larger, established firms deter small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups from participating. This limits market diversity and access to potentially groundbreaking innovations.
- **Limiting Dialogue and Feedback:** There is often a lack of meaningful interaction between buyers and potential suppliers during the process. This prevents the co-development of ideas, the articulation of needs, and the provision of useful feedback to unsuccessful bidders, all of which are crucial for a healthy innovation ecosystem.

- **Focusing on Lowest Price over Long-Term Value:** Traditional evaluation models prioritize cost minimization and compliance over long-term value, adaptability, or creativity. This discourages suppliers from investing in R&D or proposing innovative products that may have higher upfront costs but offer greater long-term efficiencies and outcomes

An Alternative to Consider

All decisions don't require a rigorous procurement process. A more flexible approach could involve:

- ❑ Setting a financial threshold to trigger Procurement's involvement
- ❑ Creating a checklist of requirements and desired outcomes for executive retreats, team building and strategy sessions.

  This checklist should be generated by the sponsoring executive. Far too often, the team member tasked with reaching out to team building consultants is unclear about objectives. They create shortlist based on what sounds like fun rather than what delivers value.

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