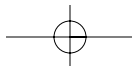
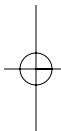
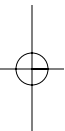
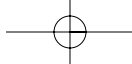


SECTION ONE

The Convenor's Guide to Ensuring a Successful Retreat



Chapter 1

So You're Thinking of Holding a Retreat



Chances are you were in a meeting today. Much of the daily work of organizations takes place in meetings. But what if your organization needs to examine fundamental issues or make a major change in its strategy or operations? Since the structure of standard meetings doesn't encourage the deep focus and thoughtful approach that such decisions require, maybe you're thinking of convening an offsite retreat. We've summarized some of the differences between retreats and meetings in Table 1.1 at the end of this chapter. Meanwhile, here are some things to consider.

Your memo announcing, "We're having a retreat," will likely trigger a variety of reactions among the staff. Some will love the idea of dedicating time to talk about new ideas and maybe hang out with more senior leaders. Others will dread the very same things. Some will recall successful retreats they've attended, while others will remember bad experiences.

Retreats can make people feel vulnerable. You say, "We want to hear the truth," but not every participant will take you at your word. Some may remember that a month after Elise spoke out about a concern, she was abruptly dismissed for reasons that were never disclosed.

Retreats are places where emotions can be exposed and expectations can be dashed. “Just let me get through these two days without getting angry,” a reluctant participant might think, while another—eager but naïve—might believe, “At last I’m going to convince people to do what I’ve been proposing for the last six months.”

Retreats often require an overnight stay; managing the logistics of being away from home can be difficult for some people. And retreats are expensive. In addition to the costs of a site, transportation, meals and lodging, and perhaps hiring a facilitator, organizations must tap their most valuable asset, staff time.

Moreover, retreats require a commitment to follow through after the participants return to work. The seeds planted at a retreat must be nurtured before the fruit can be harvested.

Finally, retreats are risky. An ill-conceived, badly prepared, poorly designed, or ineptly led retreat can make things worse and take your organization backward. Think of everything that can go wrong in a meeting, magnify it in intensity and duration, and that merely scratches the surface of what can go wrong at a retreat.

So why incur the costs and take the risks?

Well, why invest in real estate or the stock market when a savings account at a bank is insured and gives you a predictable, albeit low, rate of return? Retreats are investments in your organization’s future. Unlike meetings, which typically focus on current issues and concerns, retreats take a longer view and focus on deeper issues. Thus, while some up-front investment is required, the potential payoff of retreats is considerable.

Definitions

- For the sake of simplicity, clarity, and good grammar, we often use “he” and “she” when referring to the convenor, facilitator, and others. Our use of these personal pronouns is completely arbitrary, and readers should understand that men and women can and do play all roles in retreats.
- We use the terms “retreat,” “offsite,” and “offsite retreat” interchangeably.
- All the stories in this book are real, but names of individuals and companies and other identifying data have been changed to preserve our clients’ confidentiality.

Nine Reasons to Hold a Retreat

1. *To Explore Fundamental Concerns*

Suppose turnover is exceptionally high or staff morale low. Or you have seen a significant drop-off in customers or increase in their complaints. A retreat can be the ideal forum to explore and address the underlying causes.

2. *To Harness the Collective Creativity of the Group*

When it's important to generate ideas for new products, services, or work processes, typical brainstorming sessions often fail to produce significant results. Retreats, free of routine workplace demands, have fewer barriers to imagination and creative thinking. The offsite setting can help innovative solutions emerge.

3. *To Foster Change*

A retreat can promote new approaches to strategic planning, product design, service delivery, or marketing. The open discussion that characterizes well-run retreats promotes understanding of and commitment to new directions.

4. *To Change Perceptions, Attitudes, and Behavior*

In every organization, people make up stories to account for things they don't understand. These stories lead to attitudes and actions that can be harmful to the organization. A retreat can be a great setting for participants to raise concerns and ask questions. They can provide more information, clear up misunderstandings, discuss the impact of past decisions, and modify those decisions if priorities have changed or if prior decisions failed to achieve their purpose.

5. *To Correct Course when Things Are Going Wrong*

You can't turn an organization around by executive fiat. People will change only when they see that it's important to do so. Retreats provide a forum for discussions about the reasons for and the urgency of a desired change. When people play a role in deciding what needs to be changed, they are more committed to ensuring that the change effort succeeds.

6. *To Change Your Organization's Culture or Improve Relationships That Are Hindering Its Effectiveness*

Suppose members of a team or division are having difficulty communicating effectively with one another. Or two departments seem unable to work together. Or people are afraid to tell you what they think you might not want to hear. Retreats can help people open up to one another and create a climate of trust.

7. *To Create a Collective Vision for the Organization*

Much of the tension that exists in organizations does not stem from inherent personality conflicts, but rather from individuals pursuing their own visions of what is best for the organization. These visions often clash with one another because none of them necessarily represents the full picture of an organization's circumstances.

Retreats can help participants understand and build commitment to the organization's overall priorities. This understanding and commitment can encourage individuals to hold themselves accountable for the organization's success, not just the success of their own work group.

8. *To Accomplish Something That Cannot Be Done by the Leader Alone*

No matter how experienced and competent leaders are, they can't do everything on their own. Retreats provide an environment in which everyone can contribute knowledge, expertise, and skills to address issues that often plague and confound busy executives.

9. *To Make Tough Decisions*

Leaders often confront very tough decisions: to eliminate a signature product or service, to close down a particular operation, to reduce staff, or to change the nature of a long-standing alliance. Imagine how much more commitment there would be if many people from different levels in your organization participated in deciding what to eliminate or change and how to go about doing so, rather than simply being told what to do by the leaders.

At a retreat, leaders receive the benefit not only of broad participation in idea generation, but also of better decisions, because the group collectively will have a wider perspective and a greater number of ideas than the leader alone.

Guiding Principles for Retreat Design

Pick up an issue of *Business Week*, *Fast Company*, or *The Wall Street Journal* and you'll frequently read, "At a retreat Company X decided. . ." as a way of introducing a significant new strategy. But the articles don't say what participants in that retreat did that led them to adopt that new strategy. That's what we want to help you figure out: how to use retreats to help your organization make strategic decisions and lay the foundation required to implement them back at work. That brings us to our first guiding principle of retreat planning:

- A retreat should be designed to result in action for change.

Executives don't usually call for retreats because they're delighted with the *status quo*. They convene retreats because they want something to be different in their companies, departments, teams, or organizations. Everything in the retreat should lead participants toward the development of well-thought-out action plans that are likely to produce change for the better.

Of course, we all know that decisions are implemented only when there is strong commitment from the people who will have to take action on them. Offsite retreats provide an excellent forum for getting everyone's input into important decisions, thus increasing the chances that decisions will be widely supported.

But too often participants are skeptical. They suspect that management has already made the decisions and that the retreat is just a smokescreen to make them think they had a say in the issue. The need to allay those suspicions has led to our second guiding principle of retreat planning:

- At least some of the participants should contribute to formulating the goals of the retreat.

There are many ways to do this. Outside consultants often interview participants before committing to a retreat design. The convenor can hold internal

meetings or focus groups to discuss hopes and fears for the retreat. But however it is done, it's critical for participants to understand that the retreat is not the exclusive tool of management. Unless participants believe that they can influence the outcome, they'll simply say what they think executives want to hear, rather than speaking honestly about how they see things.

Which leads to our third guiding principle of retreat design:

- What happens at the retreat must relate to what happens in the day-to-day work of the organization.

One of the great things about retreats is that people can test new ideas and try out new approaches in a non-workplace environment. But the participants still have to be able to see how what they do at the retreat is pertinent to their work. Otherwise, the offsite feels disconnected from reality, and people will not be motivated to change their behavior when they return to the office.

One more important point: The open nature of retreats can create a sense of false security. Some people may imagine that it's safe to say or do anything, from telling sexist jokes after drinking too much at the bar to finally telling off that so-and-so. They forget that they are with colleagues with whom they will have to interact when the retreat is over.

It's important to work with the facilitator to make the behavioral boundaries very clear. A retreat is not a free-for-all.

Principles for Effective Retreats

- A retreat should be designed to result in action for change.
- At least some of the participants (the more, as practical, the better) should contribute to formulating the goals of the retreat.
- What happens at the retreat must relate to what happens in the day-to-day work of the organization.
- The need to respect other participants must be clearly understood by all.

Ten Reasons Not to Hold a Retreat

Holding a retreat isn't the best means of responding to every situation and addressing every concern you might have. Don't convene a retreat if:

1. *All You Want to Do Is Improve Morale*

While taking positive action based on the recommendations made at a retreat can increase participants' commitment to the organization, don't expect that simply holding a retreat will improve morale. In fact, just the opposite can happen. A retreat can have a negative impact if the issues that come up aren't dealt with appropriately, if people feel that their concerns are not taken seriously, if conflict is not managed successfully, if trust is violated, or if participants feel that it was a waste of their time.

2. *You Want to Use the Retreat to Reward People for Their Hard Work*

Participants rarely see retreats as rewards. They're likely to have even more work waiting for them when they return; juggling family needs can be difficult; and many would find time off with family and friends more rewarding than attending an offsite.

3. *You Want to Discover and Punish Non-Team Players*

This is a terrible reason to have a retreat. If people sense that your purpose in bringing them together is to find out who is loyal and who is not, you will erode trust and do great—if not irreparable—harm to your organization's culture.

4. *You Have a Covert Agenda That You Want to Advance*

If you try to pursue an agenda that is different from the retreat's stated purpose, you will undermine trust in you personally and in your organization. It is far better to tell participants that you have decided, for example, to cut a

department's head count and ask for their help in determining the best way to handle layoffs than to try to manipulate them during the retreat into thinking that it was their idea all along. When people figure out what you're up to (and they will!), you will have fostered resentment and engendered much more resistance to your ideas than if you had been truthful all along.

5. *You Want to Control the Conversation*

It's counterproductive to try to control what is said or who is authorized to say what. Just because something isn't said out loud doesn't mean that people don't believe it to be true. Trying to direct what participants talk about deprives you of strategic information you need to make informed decisions. Putting everything out on the table and having a candid dialogue about participants' perceptions and misperceptions is better than trying to stop them from saying what's on their minds.

6. *You Want to Avoid Conflict*

Concern about the difficulty of managing conflict is a principal and legitimate reason that many retreat convenors decide to hire outside facilitators. Chapters 7 and 9 include strategies for dealing effectively with any conflict that might emerge.

Some people relish conflict, but most dread it. Typically, the more people care about each other, the more averse they are to getting into conflict situations. But aiming to avoid conflict at all costs will practically guarantee that it will crop up and that it won't be managed effectively.

Successful retreats almost always involve surfacing and dealing with some disagreement, dispute, or difference of opinion. If no conflict emerges, chances are participants aren't being honest with themselves or with others or that the retreat has focused on issues that aren't of great concern to them. Conflict is inevitable (and actually healthy) when people care about something. We urge you not to ignore it or dismiss it. Instead, take advantage of your facilitator's expertise to find ways to manage conflict so that it can be explored openly.

7. *You Merely Want a Platform for Your Own Ideas*

Retreats provide a valuable opportunity for you to hear from others. Don't squander it by doing too much of the talking. As the convenor, it is best for you

mostly to listen to what others have to say and repress your inclination to lead discussions and resolve disputes.

8. *You Do Not Intend to Act On What Participants Recommend*

There is nothing more demoralizing to participants than being led to believe that they have a role in the decision-making process, only to learn that the decision was pre-determined. Participants naturally will expect that you will take their advice into consideration before reaching a decision, and that if you don't accept their recommendations you will explain why. If you ask participants to rubber-stamp decisions that you have already made, or if after the retreat you announce and attribute to them decisions they didn't make or ideas they didn't generate, the effect is likely to be very destructive.

9. *You Want to Defend Your Point of View, Promote Your Position, or Maintain the Status Quo*

Retreats are associated with change in most people's minds. If you want things to stay the same, have a meeting to encourage everyone to keep up the good work. Reserve retreats for when you'd like things to be different. And remember, the first person who is likely to have to change is you. Your willingness to explore more productive leadership practices will signal to participants how open they should be to trying new things.

10. *You Merely Want to Keep Up the Tradition of Having Annual Retreats*

Many people think that having a retreat with no other purpose than to bring everyone together on some regular basis is a good practice at best and at worst is harmless. It is neither. A retreat is not a company picnic. Don't plan a retreat if you don't have a serious purpose in mind. Such an event will communicate to participants that you don't value their time.

And don't confuse a retreat with a conference. Presentations by in-house or outside experts can provide valuable information or training, but they don't

Don't convene a retreat to

- Improve morale
- Reward people for their hard work
- Punish non-team players
- Advance a covert agenda
- Control the conversation
- Avoid conflict
- Disregard what participants recommend
- Defend your point of view, promote your position, or maintain the *status quo*
- Keep up the tradition of having annual retreats

constitute a retreat. It's certainly important that people be well-informed, but a retreat—at least in the way we are using the term in this book—is about sparking change, not just absorbing or exchanging information.

On the other hand, you might be able to take advantage of a tradition of holding regular retreats to accomplish some important things. However retreats may have been conducted in the past, structure the next one to address key issues that are of genuine concern to you and to the participants. Involve people in identifying those issues and in planning the event.

Kinds of Retreats

There are many kinds of retreats, each with its own characteristics and special planning concerns. Some of the most common are described below.

Executive

In an executive retreat, top management gets together without other employees, usually to chart strategic direction, measure progress against goals, foster team-

work within their group, establish new priorities, or make key decisions. The CEO frequently takes the lead in setting the retreat agenda.

Board

Board retreats typically are used to align the actions of the staff with the priorities set by the board or to help the board understand strategic and operational issues faced by the staff. Because of this board-staff interrelationship, such retreats usually include some of the organization's senior staff as well as the board members themselves.

Single Department

Retreats for a single department are often scheduled when a new department head arrives, when the organization's leaders have mandated performance improvements, or when the department needs to measure progress against goals and establish a strategy and priorities for the coming year. Such retreats can be very helpful in focusing everyone on the new goals and involving them in determining the best ways to meet them.

Interdepartmental

Occasionally people from two or more departments in the same organization jointly convene a retreat to devise better ways of working together. Because there's no hierarchical relationship between the departments, one challenge for participants in such retreats is to maintain the course decided on when everyone goes back to the pressures of the everyday work environment.

Teamwork

Managers frequently want to convene retreats to improve teamwork. The casual nature of retreats encourages people to get to know and understand each other better. We believe that the best way to build teamwork at the retreat is not through team-building exercises *per se*, but to have participants work on solving real workplace dilemmas and enhancing skills that transfer back to the office.

Associations and Member Organizations

Because people in key positions in nonprofit associations and membership organizations are often volunteers who don't work together every day, retreats can be a highly effective way of gathering the paid and unpaid leadership in one place to address broad issues.

Customer or Vendor

Organizations sometimes wish to bring together important shareholders, customers, vendors, or clients. Such retreats can help start a new partnership on the right foot or strengthen an existing relationship.

Whole System

At times organizations want to bring their entire workforce or even all their stakeholders, including customers, vendors, regulators, or community activists, together at an offsite. The goal of such a retreat is usually to reach a common understanding of key issues and foster better working relationships.

Creativity

Organizations are increasingly using retreats to spark creative thinking about their products, services, and processes. Specialists in creativity often lead these retreats, sometimes at facilities designed for that purpose. A creativity segment may also be a component of another kind of retreat, for example, a strategic planning exercise in which participants can immediately apply newly learned techniques and sharpened creative skills to solving real problems.

Fixed Format

Certain retreats follow a fixed framework that serves specific purposes. These formats include large systems interventions such as Future Search[®] and Open Space[®]; real-time simulations; and General Electric's Work-Out[™] program, which has been used by many organizations to focus their managers on performance and change issues.

See Chapter 2, "Using a Specialized Retreat Format," p. 30, for more information on these specialized retreats.

Who's Who in Planning a Retreat

To call a meeting, you send out a memo or e-mail, reserve a conference room, distribute an agenda, and perhaps make arrangements for refreshments. A good meeting takes planning, but the process of organizing one is fairly routine.

A retreat isn't so easy; it often takes weeks or even months to plan and organize. And there are very specific roles different individuals must play. Even people who don't attend have a part in determining whether the retreat will be successful. An individual may assume more than one role, but it is critical to ensure that each role is filled and carried out properly.

Convenor

This is the person who decides whether to hold a retreat. He or she might be the board chair, the CEO, a department head, or a team leader. Almost always, the convenor is someone who is senior (or at least equal) in title to most of the people who will participate. In fact, this relative position matters. People are more likely to see a retreat as important if the convenor is a senior executive.

Sometimes the convenor is a group of people—the board of directors, the membership committee, the new markets task force—who jointly agree they need to hold an offsite. It would be unwieldy, however, for the whole group to plan and design the retreat. We recommend a team of no more than three or four be formed to carry out these functions.

The convenor is not just the initiator of the retreat, but must also oversee the action plan that comes out of it. No matter what the participants agree to, the convenor will want to ensure that the plan is implemented, or the whole retreat effort and expense will have been wasted. This process, which we discuss in Chapter 15, can last for several months after the retreat.

Facilitator

The facilitator designs and leads the retreat. He or she might be an external consultant, an internal consultant from the company's human resources or organization development department, or a staff member from another department. In rare cases, the convenor might take on this role.

For more information on choosing a facilitator, see Chapter 2, "Who Should Facilitate?" pp. 22.

The facilitator plans the flow of the event. Her design focuses on "What will we do?" and "How will we do it?" She considers which exercises will most likely move the group to the desired outcome and allocates time for each. She creates a plan for the retreat from beginning to end, as well as for what has to be done in advance, such as surveys, interviews, or pre-retreat reading and other assignments.

Sometimes convenors want the design and facilitation functions performed by different people. For instance, you might hire an external consultant to design a retreat and have an internal facilitator lead it. Or you might create the agenda, alone or in concert with some of the retreat participants, and hire an external consultant to lead the retreat. Neither of these scenarios is ideal, in our experience. Carrying out someone else's design isn't like an actor reading the playwright's words. The facilitator must understand the designer's vision and intentions, and this is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do.

Administrator

The administrator is responsible for the retreat logistics, finding a place to hold the offsite, determining a date that's convenient for most intended participants, arranging for rooms and travel, planning meals and breaks, ordering audiovisual equipment, and so on. The administrator works with the convenor to establish a retreat budget, negotiate prices with the retreat site, and advise the facilitator of any unique opportunities or challenges the site might offer.

The administrator and facilitator must work together closely, because logistical details contribute greatly to the success or failure of a retreat. The facilitator may have some special needs, such as extra breakout rooms, non-intrusive morning and afternoon breaks, an overhead projector, or so many flip charts. For overnight retreats, the administrator may have to assign sleeping rooms, coordinate evening social and recreational activities, and maintain a list of emergency contact numbers.

The administrator should be present during the retreat if at all possible to handle any last-minute glitches. This will allow the convenor to be a full-time participant and will keep the facilitator free of extraneous distractions. There is only a limited amount of time to accomplish the work of the retreat, and the administrator can keep seemingly minor but actually very important details like

a sudden need for more markers or a misunderstanding about how many seats are needed in the breakout rooms from holding up progress.

In small organizations, the convenor or an internal facilitator might handle the administrator role, but avoid this arrangement if you can. It is very frustrating to participants to interrupt their discussions because someone has to deal with a mix-up over when lunch is supposed to be served.

Reporter

For a retreat to be successful, there must be a record of what is discussed, what is decided, and what action steps are agreed on. This is important for participants as well as for those who were not present at the retreat but who will be affected by the outcome.

There are several ways to capture what went on at a retreat. One is to save all relevant flip charts. Most commonly, someone transcribes the charts after the retreat and distributes copies to the participants and others who might be involved in implementing the action plan. Some organizations even take the key charts back to the office and display them in prominent locations.

In addition, some convenors like to have someone take notes of the proceedings to distribute after the retreat. Sometimes a non-participating employee is assigned to take and distribute the notes, but having a non-participant write everything down can be inhibiting to the spirit of the retreat. For that reason, we suggest that one or more of the participants keep the notes of the key discussions, decisions, and action plan elements.

Ideally, reporters should be volunteers. If people must be designated to fill this responsibility, it's important to remember that note taking is not a secretarial function and should not routinely be assigned to administrative assistants who might be among the participants.

There is more information on how to collect and report the results of the retreat in Chapter 5, "Capturing the Work Product," pp. 70–72.

Participants

In the next chapter we'll discuss different ways of deciding who should take part in the retreat. Whoever the participants are, however, they have to understand

that, despite the casual atmosphere, a retreat is real work and each person is expected to make an active contribution to that work. No one should be present as a mere observer, critic, or judge.

The Uninvited

When you convene a retreat, you also assume responsibility for the people who won't be there. Make no mistake: Unless the retreat consists of an intact work group, someone is going to feel left out. It's going to be vividly noticeable to those who weren't invited that some people are out of the office and, as one person told us, "The rest of us are stuck here covering their work." You can't prevent those feelings, but you can minimize them by communicating to participants and non-participants the goals of the retreat and why you invited the people you did. If appropriate, you might seek non-participants' input on

What can a retreat achieve?

A well-conceived, well-designed, well-run retreat can

- Help change your organization's strategic direction
- Generate new solutions for old problems
- Get everyone pulling in the same direction
- Help people feel heard about issues that matter to them
- Deal with sources of overt or buried conflict
- Allow colleagues to get to know and come to trust one another
- Foster new ways of working together
- Help people see things in new ways and envision new possibilities for themselves and the organization
- Create a common frame of reference on past events and future expectations
- Contribute to creating a new and healthier culture for the organization
- Encourage people to take risks that are necessary for the organization to thrive

the issues before the retreat, so their concerns are represented even if they are absent.

It's only human nature for the people who aren't present to speculate about what's being discussed. Naturally, they are going to have questions, so you should devise a plan, either in advance or at the retreat itself, to communicate as much as possible as soon as possible after the retreat. Think about how to involve those who didn't attend in carrying out the decisions that were made.

Table 1.1 Differences Between Retreats and Meetings

	Meetings	Retreats
Setting	Usually onsite	Conducted offsite
Attendance	Often includes people who do not work together closely	Generally people from the same department or work group, or management level
Dress	Business or business casual	Casual
Length	Less than a day; often only an hour or so	Day-long or longer; often include down-time for participants
Discussion Size	Whole group discussion	Mix of whole and small group discussions
Purpose	Convey/exchange information or make a specific decision	Explore issues or ideas and plan for the future
Structure	Hierarchical by nature; led by one person	Participative by nature; participants talk with one another
Outcomes	Generally predictable	Generally unpredictable
Risk	Low	Potentially high
Capacity to drive change	Generally low	Potentially high
Emotional involvement	Emotions not usually in open play	Can be emotionally intense

Although the people you don't invite won't be physically present, you should still consider their interests and concerns. For example, are you coming up with more work for them, but not for the retreat participants? An old Southern saying goes, "Don't let your mouth write a check that my body's gotta cash." That may be how the people back at the office will feel if you return from the retreat with an action plan . . . for *them*.

We've discussed the challenges associated with convening a retreat; looked at reasons for holding (and for not holding) one; explored different kinds of retreats; defined the roles and responsibilities of the convenor, facilitator, administrator, reporter, and participants; and outlined what a retreat might achieve. In the next chapter, we'll help you determine where you want the retreat to take you, how it will get you there, and whom you want to take along on the journey.