

IQ SERVICE REPORT

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THE RETREAT AS MANAGEMENT TOOL

The work of public officials and public managers is usually fast-paced and demanding. Therefore, when a particularly important issue demands more lengthy contemplation by the governing body or staff (or both), a retreat can offer the perfect solution. By setting aside time for a structured discussion away from the normal work environment, decision makers can explore issues in depth and exchange ideas with each other in a relaxed environment.

Retreats offer solutions for other situations as well. Sometimes conflict dominates a group's interpersonal dynamics, and a way to improve working relationships is needed. Sometimes a new governing board needs to become well acquainted in order to work effectively as a team. Sometimes a board wants to get to know a new manager or the local government's staff better.

Regardless of the purpose of the retreat, it must be well planned and structured to succeed. This report discusses the steps to success to help managers plan a productive retreat. Examples provided by managers and facilitators illustrate retreat management techniques as well as outcomes.

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The Retreat as Management Tool

Amy Cohen Paul, the author of this report, is a partner with Management Partners, Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in helping local government managers improve the way their organizations operate. Ms. Paul has more than twenty years of experience assisting local governments in a variety of areas. She has helped lead retreats for public officials and management teams; conducted community workshops; facilitated strategic planning processes; provided training, design, and installation of performance measurement systems; conducted benchmarking studies; and led organizational assessments. She was the editor of ICMA's Managing for Tomorrow: Global Change and Local Futures (1990).

The idea of a retreat conjures up different images for different people. Since retreats can be extremely varied in content and format and are used for a variety of purposes, this report will cover several types of retreats as well as retreat outcomes. It will focus on elements of success that may be helpful to public officials planning and holding retreats, and it will explain areas of sensitivity that require special attention.

Many city councils, county commissions, and other governing boards rely on annual retreats to set goals for the coming year. Strategic or long-term planning is often accomplished during retreats, either by local government staff, governing boards, or a combination of both. Besides single subject sessions (like strategic planning), retreats are useful for other purposes. For example, team building retreats are a popular way to bring disparate people together, foster greater mutual

understanding, and help them cooperate. Retreats can be used to resolve conflict that is interfering with a group's work. Regardless of the purpose of the retreat, the very act of planning and holding a retreat sends a message to the participants: we have set aside time to discuss this important subject, and we have work to accomplish.

The seven steps discussed in this report provide guidance on how to help ensure a successful retreat experience. These steps represent a compilation of advice from experts: local government managers who have benefited from using retreats and consultants who have facilitated them.

PLAN THE RETREAT

Planning is the first key element to a successful retreat. First, think about what you hope to accomplish and the nature of the group involved. What is the purpose of the retreat? Do you want to set goals for the coming year? Is the local government facing a one-time crisis or a long-term problem? Do you have a long agenda with complex issues? Is the group used to working together collaboratively, or will this be a new experience? The answers to questions such as these will help determine the time requirements of the retreat as well as its timing during the calendar year. In addition, the answers will influence the choice of participants, the location, the type of facilitation techniques used, and other aspects of the event.

Open-meeting laws may affect your retreat. While it is quite appropriate to have the public observe public officials setting public policy, some retreat subjects are more comfortably discussed without an audience. This is especially true if the purpose of the retreat is to give direction to or to evaluate an appointee of council. Some managers report asking the media not to at-

Seven steps to success

- Plan the retreat from beginning to end. Identify the goals of the retreat including the objectives for the meeting.
- Designate a facilitator (preferably a neutral party trained and skilled in facilitation techniques).
- Develop an agenda.
- Find an off-site location. Provide a comfortable environment with adequate refreshments that is conducive to work.
- Agree on ground rules that promote a safe and courteous environment.
- Encourage active participation throughout.
- Be specific about follow-up. Develop an implementation plan that designates responsibility and time lines.

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tend. Depending on the relationship you have with the media, this prohibition may or may not be appropriate. Other managers have found that scheduling a retreat for a weekend minimizes media attention. Sometimes holding the retreat some distance away from the local government's jurisdiction discourages onlookers. Of course, if they suspect that you are trying to avoid them, the press may follow you to the ends of the earth! Your own laws and local media practices will determine the most appropriate approach for your retreat.

The time spent during preparation will help determine the success of your retreat. Planning gives you the ability to articulate what it is the group wants to accomplish. The answer to that question should drive every activity during the retreat. While there is not one "right" way to prepare, experts have a variety of suggestions.

Time and Timing

If the purpose of the retreat is to set goals for the coming year, the timing of the retreat in terms of the local government's fiscal cycle will be an important consid-

eration. You may want to hold the goal-setting retreat before you begin preparing the budget, so that resources needed to achieve the goals are reflected in the budget. On the other hand, if the purpose of the retreat is team building, the preferable timing may be following an election or before a series of important council meetings.

Be sure to give participants enough advance notice so that they can arrange to attend the retreat, particularly if a weekend is involved or time away from work is required. Be sensitive to participants' needs and their time constraints. As you plan, think about what you can realistically accomplish during the retreat. For example, a three-hour retreat will not yield the same level of discussion or outcome as a retreat spanning a day and a half.

Decide Who Should Participate

Another critical part of the planning process, once the broad objective of the retreat is defined, is to consider the question "Who should participate?" Participation can be a dicey issue. Even when the retreat is targeted to one group, such as the city council or county com-

Pre-retreat interview questions for department staff

Core staff

How would you describe the overall purpose of your department?

To what degree do you experience employees being clear about the purpose of the department?

To what degree do you see the department's leadership focused on this purpose?

How do you experience the city's/department's ability to set priorities?

Customers

Whom do you see as your customers?

To what degree do you experience your department/team/city aligning itself toward the interests of its customers?

Consequences

To what degree do you experience the city as a place that makes results matter?

Does your team/department have goals/performance measures?

Is everyone aware of these goals/performance measures?

How often are these goals measured?

Are the results communicated throughout the agency?

How are people held accountable within the organization?

How do you know whether or not you are successful in your job?

Are there any rewards for good performance or consequences for poor performance?

Control

Do you feel that you have the information you need to do your job effectively?

Do you have the authority to make decisions you think you should be making?

Culture

How would you describe working here in one word or phrase?

To what extent do you feel trusted by others?

To what extent do you feel empowered?

To what extent do you feel valued/appreciated?

Are there any unwritten rules in your department/city government? What are they?

Trends

What do you see as the most critical issues or trends (internal and external) facing the city?

Politics

How do you think your department is viewed by the city council?

Infrastructure and resources

Are there particular resource constraints or opportunities that you think we should be aware of?

Leadership

What do you think the city/department should do to improve its performance?

What do you think are the barriers (past or present) to making this happen?

Contributed by Camille Cates Barnett of the Public Sector Group.

mission, the “who” question may not be as straightforward as it seems on the surface. For example, if the retreat is on growth management, it may be appropriate to invite the chairs of the planning commission, zoning board, or others with particular knowledge about this subject area. When the purpose of the retreat is solving a complex problem or mastering a multifaceted issue, “who” participates becomes especially important. “Not inviting the right people can be really damaging,” warns Michael Conduff, facilitator and city manager of Bryan, Texas.

If a governing board is deliberating about strategic planning or goal setting, it is appropriate to have the jurisdiction’s management team present. Depending on the board, the relationships, and the agenda, staff may be invited as full participants or just observers. The goals of the retreat will drive these decisions. Sometimes not inviting staff can be interpreted as exclusionary or distrustful. The facilitator should help the council think through these issues before making a decision.

Solicit Input from Participants

Kurt Jenne, assistant director of the Institute of Government, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and former city manager of Durham, North Carolina, prefers involving all the participants in the planning stage for a retreat. “I always try to meet in a group for planning purposes. I think it is essential that everybody who is going to participate in the retreat help plan it.” He feels strongly about getting buy-in before the meeting from all participants so that everyone understands the goals of the retreat. “If you have someone who’s left out of the planning stage,” he explains, “that could scuttle the whole thing. They may have a legitimate gripe if they haven’t been asked about their needs.”

Similarly, Jenne has a rule that everyone on the council or board must attend the retreat. He admits that

sometimes this is hard to achieve, but he says it is essential. Everyone’s attendance is especially important if the group is contentious or having trouble getting along with one or two individuals. He described one community that took six months to convince one of its members to participate in a retreat. As he admits, “The downside is that one member can hold the group hostage.”

Other facilitators and managers suggest conducting individual interviews before the retreat. This enables participants to discuss their primary concerns and allows any underlying issues to surface. For example, hidden agendas sometimes come to the fore. It also permits the facilitator to establish a relationship with each of the participants.

Yet another way of soliciting input from participants is to administer a questionnaire in advance of the retreat. Depending on the size of the group, this may be the most expedient way to query the participants about their ideas and get their opinions. If a questionnaire is used, the facilitator usually tabulates results and presents them as the jumping off point at the beginning of the retreat. The sidebar on page 2 prepared by Camille Cates Barnett (former chief administrative officer of the District of Columbia and former city manager of Austin, Texas) shows a series of interview questions that have been used as a planning tool with department staff. Prior to the retreat, each of the participants was asked to think about and answer the questions. This kind of attention to the topic and self-examination before the retreat will enhance the discussions and make the time off-site more valuable.

Identify Materials To Be Read in Advance

Retreats can be enriched when participants prepare by thinking about issues or reading books or articles in advance of the meeting. For example, some managers ask all the members of their team to read the same book and come prepared to discuss its application to their own situation or management system (see sidebar). Some facilitators also ask councils to provide background information or to prepare for discussion by reading materials they have chosen on a particular subject.

If you want participants to read materials before the retreat, you should give them adequate notice or provide copies for everyone involved well in advance of the meeting.

Some jurisdictions take the preparatory work a step farther by asking participants to prepare and submit written responses to questions in advance. Such homework may vary significantly, depending on the purpose of the retreat. For example, council members may be asked to prioritize issues to be discussed at the retreat or respond to open-ended questions concerning the city’s vision and mission. One community distributed the current vision and mission statement to each council member in advance and asked them to edit it by color-coding the phrases according to whether

Retreat reading list

Motivational books that discuss business in terms of parables have been popular among retreat planners. *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Spencer Johnson and *Fish! A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results* by Stephen C. Lundin et al. are two examples. Management titles recommended by managers in recent years include *Zapp! The Lightning of Empowerment: How to Improve Quality, Productivity, and Employee Satisfaction* by William C. Byham, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Steven R. Covey, *The One Minute Manager* by Ken Blanchard, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* by Peter M. Senge, and almost any of Peter Drucker’s books. Articles by John Carver on governance are particularly relevant for governing boards.

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they should be deleted, kept, or revised. As a starting point for discussion during the retreat, the facilitator displayed the original vision and mission statement as well as the edited versions. This type of advance preparation enables the group to launch into a healthy discussion more quickly than if it begins the meeting “cold.”

Develop a Budget for the Retreat

When budgeting for a retreat, consider the following elements:

- Meeting room rental
- Overnight hotel rooms (if an out-of-town site is chosen)
- Refreshments (meals, snacks, and beverages)
- Facilitator fees and expenses, if applicable
- Miscellaneous materials and equipment

It is possible to plan a low-budget retreat, if that is the objective. For example, creative retreat planners have found innovative retreat locations that cost very little (like a local community center). The appearance of spending too much is sometimes as important as actual expense, so consider what will be politically acceptable in your situation when choosing among alternative solutions.

Even on a very low budget, it is important not to skimp on food and refreshments. Physical needs should be anticipated and cared for so that participants feel good and can focus on their work. “Breaking bread” together as a group is a valuable component to a retreat because it allows participants to relate to each other on a different level than in the working group. Adequate time for meals as well as breaks for refreshments should be allocated to encourage participants to get to know each other.

Try to anticipate all of the equipment and materials that will be needed—routine materials (such as pens, paper, markers, flip charts, and masking tape) as well as more unusual items (such as Power Point projectors or video players). If any outdoor adventures are planned, other equipment might be required.

DESIGNATE A FACILITATOR

Can a retreat be successful without a facilitator? No! Can a retreat be successful without an *outside* facilitator? Yes, it is possible. Is there an advantage to having a neutral party, trained and skilled in facilitation techniques, guiding a retreat? Definitely! Somebody, whether a member of the group or an outside third party, must be responsible for filling this critical role. Without a person explicitly designated as facilitator, group dynamics are likely to jeopardize the objectives of the retreat.

There are clear advantages to having an outside facilitator at the helm during a retreat. Perhaps the most

important is that he or she can ask the hard questions with impunity and help the group work through them. As a neutral party, the facilitator can remain objective and stay focused on defining the issue, the differing points of view, and the possible solutions. If a member of the group is acting as facilitator, he or she may have difficulty remaining neutral when important or emotionally charged issues are being discussed.

The second advantage of an impartial outside facilitator is the ability to pay attention to group dynamics. A good facilitator allows the group enough time to deliberate on each agenda item yet has the skill to move the discussion along so that the retreat accomplishes its purpose. Besides assisting with the timing and the pace of the meeting, the facilitator pays close attention

Facilitator interview guide

After introducing yourself, set the stage for the facilitator you are interviewing by telling him or her something about your jurisdiction, the group (size and composition) that you are anticipating having at the retreat, and the objectives that you hope to accomplish. Then choose from the following questions to help determine whether the facilitator is right for your group.

- Please describe your facilitation style, including the types of exercises you like to use to engage a group.
- Please describe a successful retreat that you facilitated and what made it successful.
- Please describe the most difficult retreat that you facilitated and what made it difficult.
- What type of preparation would you do for the type of retreat I've described to you?
- Please tell me about a situation where you were the facilitator, and there was conflict among group members. How did you deal with it? What was the outcome at the end of the retreat? Did the group feel the meeting was successful?
- Have you worked with public sector groups before? With whom? When? Why?
- Have you ever facilitated a retreat where the press and/or the public were present? Are you comfortable doing that? Would you do anything differently if they attend? If so, what?
- What end product(s) would we expect if you were to facilitate this retreat?
- Are there any timing issues that we should consider?
- Are there any requirements for retreat facilities that we should consider if you were to facilitate? What type of room arrangements do you prefer?
- How long have you been facilitating groups? What is your formal training?
- What is your fee to facilitate this type of retreat? Does it cover expenses, or are they in addition?

to the pulse of the group. For example, if a member of the group is being counterproductive, it is the facilitator's job to help the group work together. Likewise, if a member of the group isn't participating fully, a good facilitator draws the person out to make sure that all opinions and suggestions are on the table. The facilitator can also make sure that hidden agendas don't hijack the discussion or subvert the work of the retreat.

Helping lead the group to a successful conclusion requires particular skills and experience. In a conflict situation an outside facilitator trained in conflict resolution is essential.

Choosing a Facilitator

Many management and organizational development consultants specialize in group facilitation, and many university professors also do this type of work. Some city and county managers are skilled facilitators; hiring a colleague from another jurisdiction may be a good option. A member of the local clergy may be skilled in facilitation techniques. It is important to make sure that the person chosen to facilitate is politically neutral and not a stakeholder in the group holding the retreat. For that reason, in some situations an out-of-town facilitator is advantageous.

Regardless of how you choose the facilitator, treat the selection as seriously as you would treat hiring a member of your staff. Get references and talk to others who have worked with the facilitator. Does he or she seem to have a good grasp of your unique situation? Ask questions about processes that the facilitator likes to use and make sure you are comfortable with the answers. For example, some facilitators may use exercises that could be rejected by your group as too "touchy-feely." Choose a facilitator who is comfortable with your group's style. Other questions to consider are included in the sidebar on page 4. Since success depends on interpersonal skills, after doing a basic reference check, go with your gut reaction. Then allow the facilitator to use his or her skills to develop a working agenda for your retreat.

During the selection process, be sure to ask about fees. Some facilitators charge by the hour, but most charge a fixed fee for the entire retreat, including preparation, on-site time during the retreat, and preparation of a final report/action plan (if this has been agreed to in advance). Also be sure to discuss expenses in advance. If you agree to pay expenses, be clear about what expenses are reimbursable. For out-of-town facilitators, expect to pay mileage or airfare as well as lodging and meals. A local facilitator may not require expenses.

DEVELOP AN AGENDA

Developing a detailed agenda forces the planners to think about every hour of the retreat and ensures that time is used wisely. An agenda helps planners and participants to anticipate breaks, time for refreshments,

and other physical needs of the participants.

Many facilitators prefer to work from a draft agenda with specific time periods blocked and identified. This enables the facilitator to track whether the group is on target at any given time. It is usually not necessary to share all the details included in the draft agenda with participants. The sidebar on this page provides an example of an agenda used during a planning workshop retreat for The Woodlands Community Association in The Woodlands, Texas (Steven Burkett, president and CEO). The retreat was facilitated by Julia D. Novak (city manager of Rye, New York).

An agenda also reinforces the outcome and the steps that are anticipated to get there. As this example shows, the retreat's goals and norms are articulated.

Retreat agenda

Woodlands Community Association Planning Workshop Retreat, May 13, 2000

Facilitator: Julia D. Novak

Introductions

Welcome participants and make introductions.

- Explain norms and expectations for the retreat.

Role of the board

- Review concepts from Carver Governance Model.
- Articulate the role of the board.

Board/staff expectations

- Discuss the psychological contract and its implications for board/staff relations.
- Articulate mutual expectations.

Issues and priorities

- What are the key issues facing the Woodlands Community Association?
- What does the board need to focus on during the next twelve months in order to achieve the vision?
- Twelve months from now, how will we know if we have succeeded in making progress on priority issues?

Board norms and interactions

- Discuss the purpose of articulating norms.
- Agree on critical norms for the group.
- Evaluate performance on norms.

Next steps/closing

- Get to know each other better (team building).
- Get a sense of broader community issues.
- Clarify and articulate board priorities for the coming year.
- Develop norms and expectations for board interactions.
- Discuss and clarify the board's decision-making process.
- Articulate the role of the board in achieving the mission and vision of Woodlands Community Association.

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Like a road map, the agenda enables participants to see the path that will allow them to accomplish their work. If warranted by the discussion and agreed upon by the group, detours from the path may occur.

FIND AN OFF-SITE LOCATION

Although leaving the jurisdiction is sometimes not politically acceptable, it is advantageous to locate a retreat off-site. By meeting somewhere other than the regular council chambers or conference room, the group is less prone to “business as usual” and less likely to be distracted by outside influences. Many managers think an off-site location makes a retreat more productive.

Some facilitators report urging participants not to call the office on their breaks. Laudable in concept, this “rule” is difficult to enforce. However, being off-site does emphasize the importance of the work to participants and helps reduce their inclination to run back to the office or try to conduct regular business during the retreat.

Since appearances are important in the public context, the location of the retreat should be considered carefully. Beware of fostering the perception that the council is holding its retreat in the lap of luxury, for example. One Midwest jurisdiction flew its department heads to a California resort for a management retreat, and the press had a field day. State parks and universities may offer lower-cost alternatives and provide ideal facilities for retreats. Community centers and senior centers also can be good locations.

DEVELOP GROUND RULES

Before beginning work on the substance of the retreat, the group should agree on ground rules. Ground rules establish working assumptions about conduct and expectations and can be referred to as needed by the facilitator or group members. The ground rules used by the village of Clemmons, North Carolina, for its council retreat are shown in the accompanying sidebar. Although ground rules like these may seem like common sense (and definitely reflect common courtesy), they

Suggested ground rules for working groups

Ground rules are commitments made to one another by members of a working group that are designed to help the group function more effectively. The following are some that we have found to be useful to governing boards, not only in retreats, but also in the conduct of their regular business.

Share all relevant information. When the board is discussing an issue, it is helpful for the members to share all the information they have that is relevant to understanding the issue or solving the problem at hand. The information may be facts, feelings, reactions, opinions, etc. Each person must take responsibility for sharing whatever information he or she holds and not assume that others in the group know it already. The group cannot use it until it has it.

Be specific and use examples. Speaking in generalities often makes it difficult for others to understand because each person’s experience is different. Saying specifically what you mean increases the chances that you will be understood. Using an example can give each person who is listening a common reference point.

Test assumptions and inferences publicly. If someone makes a statement that seems to you to include an unsupported assumption, you can avoid a lot of misunderstanding by verifying that the person made that assumption and finding out why he or she made it. You can also test out your own assumptions by asking the group if your assumption is correct.

Define what important words mean. Often words mean different things to different people. If a word or a term is important in the discussion and if there seem to be different meanings applied to the word, it is usually worthwhile to stop and establish a common meaning for the whole group.

Discuss interests before positions are taken. People establish their positions on issues on the basis of their interests. However, it is sometimes possible for differing interests to be satisfied by a position or solution that nobody has thought of yet. To find out whether that is possible, people have to say what their interests are. On the other hand, if people just argue for their positions without stating their interests, it is often difficult or impossible to find a common solution that might meet everyone’s needs.

Don’t take cheap shots or in other ways distract the group. When members take cheap shots at one another, it often takes the group off track and distracts the member receiving the cheap shot. Likewise, the group may be distracted by side conversations or individuals doing “off-task” activities.

Compiled by Kurt Jenne, assistant director, Institute of Government, University of North Carolina, from a set of sixteen ground rules developed by Roger Schwarz and published in “Groundrules for Effective Groups,” in *Popular Government*, Vol. 54, no. 4 (Spring 1989): pp. 25-30. Reprinted by permission of the Institute of Government, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

can remind participants of agreed-upon behaviors when emotions heat up or discussions get contentious. Ideally, the facilitator gets buy-in from the group beforehand, and during the event keeps the ground rules posted in full view.

With groups that already have a proven track record of working well together, ground rules may seem superfluous. However, for groups that have not worked together before, or have a contentious working relationship, ground rules are essential. There is value in beginning with agreement. With some groups, this may be the one area that everyone agrees on throughout the day!

Some facilitators prefer to articulate norms for group interaction during the retreat instead of establishing ground rules beforehand. Sidebars on this page and on pages 8 and 9 show two sets of norms identified by the community association board in The Woodlands, Texas—the first are those that the participants agreed to use during the planning retreat. As part of their work at the retreat, the board then considered a longer set of norms and agreed to adopt a subset of them to govern their own interactions during subsequent meetings. As the sidebar shows, the board then went a step farther and rated its current performance compared with the norms it had just adopted. It is easy to see the value of this type of exercise by a board that wants to improve its interactions and communication.

ENCOURAGE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION THROUGHOUT THE RETREAT

The well-prepared facilitator begins the retreat with a good understanding of each of the participant's needs as well as each person's issues and concerns. A skilled facilitator executes the agenda and keeps the meeting flowing. He or she makes sure that all participants take an active role in discussions and that their opinions get heard. It is also the responsibility of the facilitator to help the group stick to the agenda and accomplish what it set out to do.

Retreat norms for participants

- Listen with respect...
 - ...no interrupting
 - ...no talking over
 - ...disagree agreeably
- Stay on task
- Value differences
- Be candid and honest
- Enjoy! Have a GOOD DAY
- No sidebar conversations.

From Woodlands Community Association, The Woodlands, Texas.

A skilled facilitator brings a “bag of tricks” to use as applicable. For example, such techniques as nominal group process, force field analysis, cause-and-effect diagrams (also known as fishbone diagrams) can be used very effectively, depending on the desired outcome of the group and the issue or problem being discussed. An experienced facilitator knows when to encourage consensus and when to allow participants to express themselves through a vote. This expertise helps ensure active participation and a good flow of ideas.

The facilitator usually builds in appropriate ice breakers or warm-up techniques to get the group talking at the beginning of the retreat. Warm-ups range from activities that help people to get to know each other on a personal level (like paired introductions or talking about personal experiences) to more work-oriented activities (like writing a short list of issues or prioritizing issues that were identified previously by the group). It is up to the facilitator to suggest these activities and get the group started successfully.

Another important role for the facilitator is to keep the group balanced and positive. Humor is useful in this regard. The facilitator does not need to be a stand-up comic, but he or she must be prepared to ease tension or bring the group together if the discussion gets too heavy or acrimonious. Laughter is often the quickest means to this end. Some facilitators use physical activities as tension breakers. They may ask everyone to line up and rub the back of the person in front of them or divide participants into different quadrants of the room to express opinions. Physical exercises, like jumping jacks or big arm circles, can bring relief in a tense setting.

Exercises that encourage creativity and fun can bring levity to a heavy issue-oriented agenda. An activity that stretches the imagination, like challenging small groups to find as many innovative uses as possible for a paper clip or toothpick (or any common item), can add humor to a meeting. Time must be considered, however, and there is a fine line between group “work” and frivolity. Again, a good facilitator knows when to inject ten minutes of a creative exercise into a packed agenda.

BE SPECIFIC ABOUT FOLLOW-UP

In order to ensure that the energy generated by the retreat does not dissipate and that the decisions that were reached are implemented, someone must document the results of the retreat and establish a timeline for action. Be sure to designate before the retreat the person who will be responsible for this task. If you are counting on the facilitator to produce a final report that summarizes the retreat, make sure that you've been explicit about that in advance.

Many facilitators build the reporting process into the structure of the retreat by publicly recording important decisions as they are made. Lists and notes

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made on a flip chart or large sheets of paper and posted around the room are helpful later for creating a report of the retreat's results. If appropriate to the purpose and nature of the retreat, participants can be given opportunities to annotate these public "minutes" during breaks, so that the record is further enhanced.

Ideally, the last item on the agenda will be a wrap-up that includes next steps and an implementation action plan. To the list of next steps, the implementation action plan attaches names of responsible persons, specific actions to be taken, and milestones (specific dates). Although some facilitators include an implementation plan as part of their assignment (working with the participants during the retreat to create the plan, or perhaps with the management team after the retreat), others may not. Be sure to discuss this with the facilitator in advance.

Regardless of who creates the follow-up plan, it is critical to the success of the retreat. When the retreat is over and participants go back to their "real" jobs, the implementation plan ensures that the ideas expressed during the retreat get put into action. The table on page 10 shows an action plan for two initiatives that were discussed during a retreat in a Midwest city. It identifies the specific actions to be taken, assigns responsibility for each action, and sets the date by which each step is expected to be accomplished.

The wrap-up also gives the retreat leader an opportunity to set the date (or dates) for follow-up meetings if they are required. If everyone at the retreat agrees on common goals and objectives, there will be momentum afterward to take specific actions (for example, attend future meetings or organize committees to follow up on work done at the retreat). Individuals or committees might agree to report back to the group within a certain time on the results of the investigation they have promised to undertake. The enthusiasm generated by the retreat can contribute to participants' willingness to volunteer for these assignments.

TYPES OF RETREATS

Council Retreats

Many managers hold annual planning retreats with their councils. Goal setting and strategic planning are two of the most common reasons for these retreats, but other topics could be addressed as well. Whenever a group could benefit from focusing on a particular issue or set of issues, a retreat could be useful.

In addition to focusing on issues, some councils conduct retreats to enhance communication among themselves and with staff. One council used a retreat as an opportunity to build rapport with a new man-

Retreat norms for board members

The Woodlands Community Association Board evaluated the following list of norms:

- To place cooperation, trust, and respect at the heart of all we do
- To behave ethically as we carry out our daily responsibilities
- To operate as an effective team, continually improving that effectiveness
- To work for win-win situations instead of win-lose situations
- To actively listen, keeping an open mind and suspending judgment
- To stay focused and avoid tangents
- To be proactive in the exercise of our office
- To do our best to answer questions posed by one another, our employees, and the community
- To honor "discussion" before "decisions"
- To focus policy making on important "ends" for our owners/customers
- To focus discussion of "means" by identifying unacceptable practices and trusting our staff to competently execute their responsibilities
- To be honest and candid with one another
- To give and take positive feedback and coaching
- To focus on working "with" instead of "for" or "under"
- To not take differences of opinion personally
- To disagree agreeably and professionally
- To realize that people make mistakes—forgive and forget
- To realize the virtue of debate and avoid the liability of argument
- To realize and honor varying work styles, personalities, and process needs
- To share information and avoid surprises
- To minimize the practice of "sign-offs" and ratify when needed
- To challenge and motivate one another.
- To maintain a sense of levity. Our service should be fun as well as work.

The board agreed to adopt the following norms to govern its interactions:

- To place cooperation, trust, and respect at the heart of all we do
- To work for win-win situations instead of win-lose situations
- To honor "discussion" before "decisions"
- To focus policy making on important "ends" for our owners/customers
- To be honest and candid with each other
- To share information and avoid surprises
- To maintain a sense of levity (humor).

ager and staff. In this case the newly appointed manager, top management, and council spent the retreat articulating expectations and getting to know each other better. The sidebar on page 11, a list of expectations the mayor and council articulated for the manager, was a product of the retreat.

Joint Retreat for Council and School Board

Another, more unusual type of retreat is one that brings two (or more) independent organizations together. The city of Martinsville, Virginia, holds an annual retreat with its school board to discuss current issues and enhance communication between the two governing bodies. Martinsville, like some jurisdictions in Virginia, has a school board that is appointed by the council but acts as an independent institution. The city council approves its budget yet has no line item authority and therefore no real control over the school board's budget. This can lead to an acrimonious situation between the board and the council.

Martinsville's city manager, Earl Reynolds Jr., is a strong believer in communication. Several years ago, when a new school superintendent arrived, Reynolds took the initiative and invited the superintendent and the school board to a retreat. The group (about 15 total including 5 members of each board, clerks of both gov-

erning boards as well as key staff) gathered together for one and one-half days off-site. A facilitator interviewed the board members in advance, planned the meeting, and assisted the group on-site. The retreat was so successful in improving communications and understanding between the groups that they have held joint retreats several times since then. The outcomes included a new level of mutual trust and respect, as well as the initiation of a partnering concept between board members that has also improved understanding. The sidebar pages 12 and 13 shows the decisions made during several joint planning retreats.

Team-Building Retreats

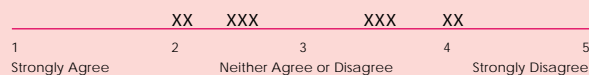
Team-building retreats differ from issue-based or planning retreats. When team building is the primary purpose, different techniques are usually used. Team building is sometimes less comfortable for participants than discussion of issues. Sometimes team-building exercises involve a physical component, like group challenges with obstacle courses, whitewater rafting, hiking, etc. Other team-building techniques, such as the Strength Development Inventory or Myers-Briggs indicators, are more cerebral and are useful when trying to develop a better understanding of team dynamics.

Kurt Bressner, the city manager of Downers Grove,

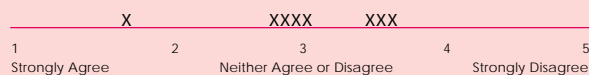
Evaluation of retreat norms for board members

The board rated itself on the norms it had chosen.

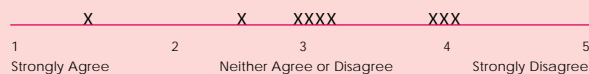
We place cooperation, trust, and respect at the heart of all we do



We work for win-win situations instead of win-lose situations

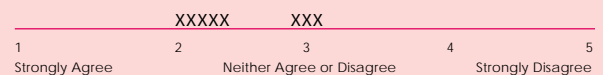


We honor "discussion" before "decisions"

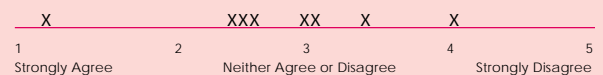


Source: Woodlands Community Association, The Woodlands, Texas.

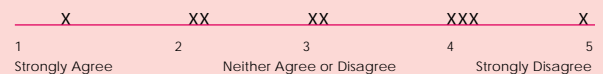
We focus policy making on important "ends" for our owners/customers



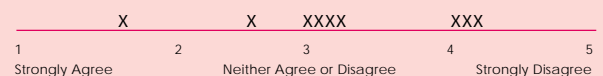
We maintain a sense of levity; our service is fun as well as work.



We are honest and candid with each other



We share information and avoid surprises



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Mistakes to avoid

Even when a retreat agenda is packed with work-related items and little or no recreational time has been allocated, managers need to be sensitive to perceptions by the public about how the jurisdiction spends its money. The following list is based on advice from managers about how to avoid unnecessary problems.

- Be aware of the retreat location and setting. A posh resort may draw criticism, so be sensitive to appearances. If you decide to leave town, think about the perception and expense involved with travel.
- Be aware of public open-meeting laws. You may need to announce the retreat well in advance, and you may have press coverage.
- Be careful of the perception that retreat participants are “knocking off on city time.” Although taking city staff on a retreat is likely to be highly productive and an excellent use of time, you may want to consider holding the retreat over a weekend, or at least including part of a weekend in your work.
- Don’t plan on tape recording or videotaping the retreat. Tape recorders inhibit discussion and may prevent participants from speaking freely. Since it is important to record decisions, have the facilitator be responsible for this task or ask someone else in the group to take charge of recording decisions.
- Avoid expecting too much in too short of a time. Timing is key, and it is important to allow adequate time for discussion and reflection. Be sensitive to how much work is, expected in the time you allocated.
- Be sure to plan adequate time for implementation and follow-up. Without implementation and a structured follow-up, there will be no clear relationship between the value of the retreat (and the work accomplished during the retreat) and progress toward those decisions.

Sample council retreat action plan

January 7-8, 2000

Action steps for telecommunications initiative

	Responsible person	Due date	Status*
1. Review other jurisdictions' cellular tower ordinances	Roberto Jones	February 15	
2. Develop a cellular towers ordinance	Roberto Jones	March 1	
3. Develop a glossary of telecommunications terms	Jane Smith	February 15	
4. Review other jurisdictions' telecommunications policies	Jane Smith	March 15	
5. Develop a telecommunications policy for the city	Jane Smith	April 1	

*The “Status” column is used to mark progress as the action plan is reviewed periodically.

Action steps for Web site initiative

	Responsible person	Due date	Status*
1. Research requirements to allow e-commerce transactions	Jim Donovan	February 15	
2. Develop prototype screens for paying traffic citations in line	Jim Donovan	May 1	
3. Develop capacity to allow all vendors to access city's purchasing site online	Wendy Root	April 1	

*The “Status” column is used to mark progress as the action plan is reviewed periodically.

Illinois, wanted to strengthen the relationship between staff and commissioners and ease the tension between them. He took the group on a wilderness trail obstacle course. The session, arranged through a local hospital that offered corporate training, was well planned and executed. Although Bressner recalls having to do “a little shuttle diplomacy” to get everyone to agree to the retreat, the staff and commissioners ultimately felt it was extremely successful. The commissioners got to know the staff in a more relaxed setting, and they could see firsthand how well the Downers Grove staff worked together. They also had a chance to experience something out of the ordinary and challenge themselves. Bressner, now the manager of Boynton Beach, Florida, feels that team-building retreats provide a worthwhile

experience and that it is money well spent. “I want to do the high ropes with the Boynton Beach staff and commissioners next,” he says.

Another team-building tool that many jurisdictions, including Downers Grove, have used successfully is the Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator. This tool is particularly useful when the group is discussing how to improve relationships and communication styles. Although some participants may be reluctant to reveal their preferences, confidentiality can be guaranteed. An overall discussion of different styles and how to work best with each type of personality can improve relationships and promote better understanding of individuals.

Sample retreat outcome: Council expectations for the city manager

Leadership

- In a city forum set issues straight when needed.
- Get out of the shadow of the former city manager and promote the emergence of your own style; be yourself in terms of skills, knowledge, and way of relating to mayor and council.
- Do what your background says you can do.
- Help develop policy; give the best advice possible.
- Make recommendations known.
- Advocate but don't expect the mayor and council to take your advice on all occasions.
- Be trustworthy and committed to excellence.
- Be here a long time; the city purchased what you have to offer: background, training, and a perspective that will be beneficial to the city.
- Turn up the microphone, speak out, don't convey passiveness.
- Assess the organization of the city—departments, board and commissions, appointed officials, etc.—and what improvements might be needed.
- Lay out a game plan for the future mayor and council to make the city an even better place.
- Help identify what the city needs to be doing that it currently is not.
- Communicate frequently—forward information (e-mail).

Management

- Somebody who is hands-on and does not delegate everything; use the skills/abilities of deputy city manager and know what is going on.
- Run the city—take care of day-to-day things.
- Provide, with deputy city manager, leadership to staff.
- Demand a high level of performance from city staff and departments.
- Communicate and build relationships with other department heads.
- Continue letting senior staff have input.
- Deal competently with the transition—change of relationship between acting/deputy manager and new city manager.

Interaction with community

- Be very visible in community.
- Be aware of the image that the city manager conveys to citizens; communicate respect.
- Remember that you are serving the citizens.

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Joint city council–school board retreats

What follows is a composite of the agreements and understandings that the Martinsville city council and the Martinsville city school board adopted during joint retreats from 1993 through 1996. Each of these retreats was facilitated by R. David Blackman of Blackman and Associates of Greensboro, N.C. He documented each retreat, and representatives of the city and the public schools reviewed and edited the documentation before final copies were printed and distributed. Revisions and additions to these agreements made during subsequent joint retreats were incorporated in this document.

Visions

The two groups have not agreed upon formal goals for education; however, they identified concepts that all agreed should be included in the thinking of both groups as they evaluate the annual results of the educational thrusts of the city schools. In that light, schools should:

- Provide a safe environment for students and faculty
- Establish and meet standards for proficiency in reading, writing, and math
- Train students in practical life skills
- Create an atmosphere conducive to learning
- Assist students in the development of positive attitudes toward lifelong learning
- Seek broad community support for the goals and objectives of education
- Increase the public's awareness of the importance of education to the quality of life of Martinsville and its impact on economic development

Council–School Board Roles

Roles were identified. It falls to the city manager and the superintendent of schools to manage the relationships between the council and the school board. Agreement was reached on the following responsibilities.

Council responsibilities

- Provide funding for the budget of the Martinsville city schools
- Appoint members of the school board
- Define the terms of the school board members
- Establish standards for the selection of school board members
- Employ the city manager
- Establish the personnel policies for city employees
- Establish pay rates and scales for city employees
- Collaborate on policy matters that impact the council and the school board

School board responsibilities

- Establish policy for the operation of the Martinsville city schools
- Review, approve, and modify all school budgets
- Employ the superintendent of schools
- Oversee hiring and all personnel matters
- Establish the personnel policies of the Martinsville city schools
- Establish the pay scales of school employees
- Collaborate on policy matters that impact the council the school board, and the county public schools.

Building Good Relationships

The groups agree that there must be a continuous effort to improve their relationships. While the council's official role with the schools concludes with the appointment of the school board and the approval of the budget allocation, the relationship continues as both groups react to each other's needs and community input. The council's role as the taxation agent creates community pressures that the school board should recognize and appreciate. The groups agree that the following can assist in making their relationships better:

- Establish common systems for management and personnel matters
- Develop a common vision for education
- Encourage citizen input on education goals
- Increase the sharing of information about taxes, schools, personnel, etc.
- Hold regular joint meetings for educational and informational purposes
- Inform the public on school and tax matters and their interrelationship
- Increase one-on-one communications among council and school board members
- Develop a joint plan for providing public information to the community.

Council-School Board Budget Process

The development and implementation of the budget process create the greatest tension and potential for misunderstanding. During past retreats the council and the school board have agreed on the following principles regarding their common budgeting relationship:

- The schools will submit yearly budget requests to cover all programs funded in the previous year's budget.
- All budget requests for new programs for the budget year will be submitted as a supplemental request.
- Budget projections for the year will not include any pay adjustments.
- The school board will advise the council when it is implementing federal and state mandates.
- The school board will alert the council at the earliest possible time when variations are expected in its budget.
- The school board will see that supplemental appropriations are on the council's agenda.
- The school board will inform the council regarding future matters that are likely to impact budget allocations.
- The school board should seek contingency funding in its annual budget requests.
- Council and school board members will receive budget information by April 1 of each year.
- Work sessions will be held to review the budget and make adjustments before the budget comes formally to the council for adoption.
- The council will make allocations to the school board by May 1 of the budget year; knowing about budget changes will allow the schools to plan for personnel issues.
- The school board should develop, update, and submit a capital improvement budget each year.
- When programs funded with monies other than those allocated by the council are being discontinued or when programs are expected to lose their funding base, the school board will inform the council at the earliest possible time.
- The council and the school board will aggressively increase their joint lobbying efforts with the state to secure increased funding for capital projects.
- The school board should establish program priorities for its budget and identify the cost for the development and delivery of those services.
- Compensation issues will be reviewed as a percentage of current costs.
- Both the council and the school board will work at sharing budget and program information in preliminary exchanges of information so that surprises are eliminated during the budget development phase.
- The council and the school board will work to agree on strategies that will allow the implementation of long-term plans in the city schools.
- Formal communications among council members and the school board will be by written memos, with copies distributed by each group's chairperson. Informal communications among group members will be designed around a "buddy system" to encourage regular sharing of information and concerns.

Source: Prepared for the city council of Martinsville and Martinsville city school board by R. David Blackman and Associates, Greensboro, N.C.

CONCLUSION

A retreat is an important tool in a leader's arsenal. A well-run retreat can define the agenda for the group, build consensus around agenda elements, develop team buy-in and support for the ideas that will drive the organization, and create an implementation action plan. In short, it can be an excellent tool for a variety of group situations.

Since so much of the work in a jurisdiction is done by groups (whether it is the council, the commission, the management team, or appointed decision-making bodies), good working relations are essential for productivity. The retreat enables a group to step back from its regular business and take time to focus on issues that might never be examined or addressed otherwise. A retreat is especially valuable if conflict among group members is hindering productivity. A facilitator can help the group work through its conflicts and emerge

a stronger team. A good facilitator can even teach participants how to deal with unproductive conflict if it should arise again.

Planning is key to a retreat's success. Identifying a good facilitator who will guide the preparations and on-site work is an extremely important step, as is the development of an agenda that reflects the outcomes the group wants to achieve. As these tasks are being accomplished, off-site locations can be researched. Once all of these elements are decided on, the retreat is in the "go" mode. The facilitator will then take over, working with the group to develop ground rules and encouraging active involvement by all participants so that the agenda of the retreat can be followed. As the hard, rewarding work of the retreat comes to an end and hands are shaken and good-byes are spoken, one last task remains: a follow-up action plan must be created to ensure that the decisions made on the retreat are documented and implemented.

**The Retreat as
Management Tool**

**Volume 33/ Number 1
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The Retreat as Management Tool

Amy Cohen Paul, the author of this report, is a partner with Management Partners, Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in helping local government managers improve the way their organizations operate. Ms. Paul has more than twenty years of experience assisting local governments in a variety of areas. She has helped lead retreats for public officials and management teams; conducted community workshops; facilitated strategic planning processes; provided training, design, and installation of performance measurement systems; conducted benchmarking studies; and led organizational assessments. She was the editor of ICMA's Managing for Tomorrow: Global Change and Local Futures (1990).

The idea of a retreat conjures up different images for different people. Since retreats can be extremely varied in content and format and are used for a variety of purposes, this report will cover several types of retreats as well as retreat outcomes. It will focus on elements of success that may be helpful to public officials planning and holding retreats, and it will explain areas of sensitivity that require special attention.

Many city councils, county commissions, and other governing boards rely on annual retreats to set goals for the coming year. Strategic or long-term planning is often accomplished during retreats, either by local government staff, governing boards, or a combination of both. Besides single subject sessions (like strategic planning), retreats are useful for other purposes. For example, team building retreats are a popular way to bring disparate people together, foster greater mutual

understanding, and help them cooperate. Retreats can be used to resolve conflict that is interfering with a group's work. Regardless of the purpose of the retreat, the very act of planning and holding a retreat sends a message to the participants: we have set aside time to discuss this important subject, and we have work to accomplish.

The seven steps discussed in this report provide guidance on how to help ensure a successful retreat experience. These steps represent a compilation of advice from experts: local government managers who have benefited from using retreats and consultants who have facilitated them.

PLAN THE RETREAT

Planning is the first key element to a successful retreat. First, think about what you hope to accomplish and the nature of the group involved. What is the purpose of the retreat? Do you want to set goals for the coming year? Is the local government facing a one-time crisis or a long-term problem? Do you have a long agenda with complex issues? Is the group used to working together collaboratively, or will this be a new experience? The answers to questions such as these will help determine the time requirements of the retreat as well as its timing during the calendar year. In addition, the answers will influence the choice of participants, the location, the type of facilitation techniques used, and other aspects of the event.

Open-meeting laws may affect your retreat. While it is quite appropriate to have the public observe public officials setting public policy, some retreat subjects are more comfortably discussed without an audience. This is especially true if the purpose of the retreat is to give direction to or to evaluate an appointee of council. Some managers report asking the media not to at-

Seven steps to success

- Plan the retreat from beginning to end. Identify the goals of the retreat including the objectives for the meeting.
- Designate a facilitator (preferably a neutral party trained and skilled in facilitation techniques).
- Develop an agenda.
- Find an off-site location. Provide a comfortable environment with adequate refreshments that is conducive to work.
- Agree on ground rules that promote a safe and courteous environment.
- Encourage active participation throughout.
- Be specific about follow-up. Develop an implementation plan that designates responsibility and time lines.

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tend. Depending on the relationship you have with the media, this prohibition may or may not be appropriate. Other managers have found that scheduling a retreat for a weekend minimizes media attention. Sometimes holding the retreat some distance away from the local government's jurisdiction discourages onlookers. Of course, if they suspect that you are trying to avoid them, the press may follow you to the ends of the earth! Your own laws and local media practices will determine the most appropriate approach for your retreat.

The time spent during preparation will help determine the success of your retreat. Planning gives you the ability to articulate what it is the group wants to accomplish. The answer to that question should drive every activity during the retreat. While there is not one "right" way to prepare, experts have a variety of suggestions.

Time and Timing

If the purpose of the retreat is to set goals for the coming year, the timing of the retreat in terms of the local government's fiscal cycle will be an important consid-

eration. You may want to hold the goal-setting retreat before you begin preparing the budget, so that resources needed to achieve the goals are reflected in the budget. On the other hand, if the purpose of the retreat is team building, the preferable timing may be following an election or before a series of important council meetings.

Be sure to give participants enough advance notice so that they can arrange to attend the retreat, particularly if a weekend is involved or time away from work is required. Be sensitive to participants' needs and their time constraints. As you plan, think about what you can realistically accomplish during the retreat. For example, a three-hour retreat will not yield the same level of discussion or outcome as a retreat spanning a day and a half.

Decide Who Should Participate

Another critical part of the planning process, once the broad objective of the retreat is defined, is to consider the question "Who should participate?" Participation can be a dicey issue. Even when the retreat is targeted to one group, such as the city council or county com-

Pre-retreat interview questions for department staff

Core staff

How would you describe the overall purpose of your department?

To what degree do you experience employees being clear about the purpose of the department?

To what degree do you see the department's leadership focused on this purpose?

How do you experience the city's/department's ability to set priorities?

Customers

Whom do you see as your customers?

To what degree do you experience your department/team/city aligning itself toward the interests of its customers?

Consequences

To what degree do you experience the city as a place that makes results matter?

Does your team/department have goals/performance measures?

Is everyone aware of these goals/performance measures?

How often are these goals measured?

Are the results communicated throughout the agency?

How are people held accountable within the organization?

How do you know whether or not you are successful in your job?

Are there any rewards for good performance or consequences for poor performance?

Control

Do you feel that you have the information you need to do your job effectively?

Do you have the authority to make decisions you think you should be making?

Culture

How would you describe working here in one word or phrase?

To what extent do you feel trusted by others?

To what extent do you feel empowered?

To what extent do you feel valued/appreciated?

Are there any unwritten rules in your department/city government? What are they?

Trends

What do you see as the most critical issues or trends (internal and external) facing the city?

Politics

How do you think your department is viewed by the city council?

Infrastructure and resources

Are there particular resource constraints or opportunities that you think we should be aware of?

Leadership

What do you think the city/department should do to improve its performance?

What do you think are the barriers (past or present) to making this happen?

Contributed by Camille Cates Barnett of the Public Sector Group.

mission, the “who” question may not be as straightforward as it seems on the surface. For example, if the retreat is on growth management, it may be appropriate to invite the chairs of the planning commission, zoning board, or others with particular knowledge about this subject area. When the purpose of the retreat is solving a complex problem or mastering a multifaceted issue, “who” participates becomes especially important. “Not inviting the right people can be really damaging,” warns Michael Conduff, facilitator and city manager of Bryan, Texas.

If a governing board is deliberating about strategic planning or goal setting, it is appropriate to have the jurisdiction’s management team present. Depending on the board, the relationships, and the agenda, staff may be invited as full participants or just observers. The goals of the retreat will drive these decisions. Sometimes not inviting staff can be interpreted as exclusionary or distrustful. The facilitator should help the council think through these issues before making a decision.

Solicit Input from Participants

Kurt Jenne, assistant director of the Institute of Government, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and former city manager of Durham, North Carolina, prefers involving all the participants in the planning stage for a retreat. “I always try to meet in a group for planning purposes. I think it is essential that everybody who is going to participate in the retreat help plan it.” He feels strongly about getting buy-in before the meeting from all participants so that everyone understands the goals of the retreat. “If you have someone who’s left out of the planning stage,” he explains, “that could scuttle the whole thing. They may have a legitimate gripe if they haven’t been asked about their needs.”

Similarly, Jenne has a rule that everyone on the council or board must attend the retreat. He admits that

sometimes this is hard to achieve, but he says it is essential. Everyone’s attendance is especially important if the group is contentious or having trouble getting along with one or two individuals. He described one community that took six months to convince one of its members to participate in a retreat. As he admits, “The downside is that one member can hold the group hostage.”

Other facilitators and managers suggest conducting individual interviews before the retreat. This enables participants to discuss their primary concerns and allows any underlying issues to surface. For example, hidden agendas sometimes come to the fore. It also permits the facilitator to establish a relationship with each of the participants.

Yet another way of soliciting input from participants is to administer a questionnaire in advance of the retreat. Depending on the size of the group, this may be the most expedient way to query the participants about their ideas and get their opinions. If a questionnaire is used, the facilitator usually tabulates results and presents them as the jumping off point at the beginning of the retreat. The sidebar on page 2 prepared by Camille Cates Barnett (former chief administrative officer of the District of Columbia and former city manager of Austin, Texas) shows a series of interview questions that have been used as a planning tool with department staff. Prior to the retreat, each of the participants was asked to think about and answer the questions. This kind of attention to the topic and self-examination before the retreat will enhance the discussions and make the time off-site more valuable.

Identify Materials To Be Read in Advance

Retreats can be enriched when participants prepare by thinking about issues or reading books or articles in advance of the meeting. For example, some managers ask all the members of their team to read the same book and come prepared to discuss its application to their own situation or management system (see sidebar). Some facilitators also ask councils to provide background information or to prepare for discussion by reading materials they have chosen on a particular subject.

If you want participants to read materials before the retreat, you should give them adequate notice or provide copies for everyone involved well in advance of the meeting.

Some jurisdictions take the preparatory work a step farther by asking participants to prepare and submit written responses to questions in advance. Such homework may vary significantly, depending on the purpose of the retreat. For example, council members may be asked to prioritize issues to be discussed at the retreat or respond to open-ended questions concerning the city’s vision and mission. One community distributed the current vision and mission statement to each council member in advance and asked them to edit it by color-coding the phrases according to whether

Retreat reading list

Motivational books that discuss business in terms of parables have been popular among retreat planners. *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Spencer Johnson and *Fish! A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results* by Stephen C. Lundin et al. are two examples. Management titles recommended by managers in recent years include *Zapp! The Lightning of Empowerment: How to Improve Quality, Productivity, and Employee Satisfaction* by William C. Byham, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Steven R. Covey, *The One Minute Manager* by Ken Blanchard, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* by Peter M. Senge, and almost any of Peter Drucker’s books. Articles by John Carver on governance are particularly relevant for governing boards.

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they should be deleted, kept, or revised. As a starting point for discussion during the retreat, the facilitator displayed the original vision and mission statement as well as the edited versions. This type of advance preparation enables the group to launch into a healthy discussion more quickly than if it begins the meeting “cold.”

Develop a Budget for the Retreat

When budgeting for a retreat, consider the following elements:

- Meeting room rental
- Overnight hotel rooms (if an out-of-town site is chosen)
- Refreshments (meals, snacks, and beverages)
- Facilitator fees and expenses, if applicable
- Miscellaneous materials and equipment

It is possible to plan a low-budget retreat, if that is the objective. For example, creative retreat planners have found innovative retreat locations that cost very little (like a local community center). The appearance of spending too much is sometimes as important as actual expense, so consider what will be politically acceptable in your situation when choosing among alternative solutions.

Even on a very low budget, it is important not to skimp on food and refreshments. Physical needs should be anticipated and cared for so that participants feel good and can focus on their work. “Breaking bread” together as a group is a valuable component to a retreat because it allows participants to relate to each other on a different level than in the working group. Adequate time for meals as well as breaks for refreshments should be allocated to encourage participants to get to know each other.

Try to anticipate all of the equipment and materials that will be needed—routine materials (such as pens, paper, markers, flip charts, and masking tape) as well as more unusual items (such as Power Point projectors or video players). If any outdoor adventures are planned, other equipment might be required.

DESIGNATE A FACILITATOR

Can a retreat be successful without a facilitator? No! Can a retreat be successful without an *outside* facilitator? Yes, it is possible. Is there an advantage to having a neutral party, trained and skilled in facilitation techniques, guiding a retreat? Definitely! Somebody, whether a member of the group or an outside third party, must be responsible for filling this critical role. Without a person explicitly designated as facilitator, group dynamics are likely to jeopardize the objectives of the retreat.

There are clear advantages to having an outside facilitator at the helm during a retreat. Perhaps the most

important is that he or she can ask the hard questions with impunity and help the group work through them. As a neutral party, the facilitator can remain objective and stay focused on defining the issue, the differing points of view, and the possible solutions. If a member of the group is acting as facilitator, he or she may have difficulty remaining neutral when important or emotionally charged issues are being discussed.

The second advantage of an impartial outside facilitator is the ability to pay attention to group dynamics. A good facilitator allows the group enough time to deliberate on each agenda item yet has the skill to move the discussion along so that the retreat accomplishes its purpose. Besides assisting with the timing and the pace of the meeting, the facilitator pays close attention

Facilitator interview guide

After introducing yourself, set the stage for the facilitator you are interviewing by telling him or her something about your jurisdiction, the group (size and composition) that you are anticipating having at the retreat, and the objectives that you hope to accomplish. Then choose from the following questions to help determine whether the facilitator is right for your group.

- Please describe your facilitation style, including the types of exercises you like to use to engage a group.
- Please describe a successful retreat that you facilitated and what made it successful.
- Please describe the most difficult retreat that you facilitated and what made it difficult.
- What type of preparation would you do for the type of retreat I've described to you?
- Please tell me about a situation where you were the facilitator, and there was conflict among group members. How did you deal with it? What was the outcome at the end of the retreat? Did the group feel the meeting was successful?
- Have you worked with public sector groups before? With whom? When? Why?
- Have you ever facilitated a retreat where the press and/or the public were present? Are you comfortable doing that? Would you do anything differently if they attend? If so, what?
- What end product(s) would we expect if you were to facilitate this retreat?
- Are there any timing issues that we should consider?
- Are there any requirements for retreat facilities that we should consider if you were to facilitate? What type of room arrangements do you prefer?
- How long have you been facilitating groups? What is your formal training?
- What is your fee to facilitate this type of retreat? Does it cover expenses, or are they in addition?

to the pulse of the group. For example, if a member of the group is being counterproductive, it is the facilitator's job to help the group work together. Likewise, if a member of the group isn't participating fully, a good facilitator draws the person out to make sure that all opinions and suggestions are on the table. The facilitator can also make sure that hidden agendas don't hijack the discussion or subvert the work of the retreat.

Helping lead the group to a successful conclusion requires particular skills and experience. In a conflict situation an outside facilitator trained in conflict resolution is essential.

Choosing a Facilitator

Many management and organizational development consultants specialize in group facilitation, and many university professors also do this type of work. Some city and county managers are skilled facilitators; hiring a colleague from another jurisdiction may be a good option. A member of the local clergy may be skilled in facilitation techniques. It is important to make sure that the person chosen to facilitate is politically neutral and not a stakeholder in the group holding the retreat. For that reason, in some situations an out-of-town facilitator is advantageous.

Regardless of how you choose the facilitator, treat the selection as seriously as you would treat hiring a member of your staff. Get references and talk to others who have worked with the facilitator. Does he or she seem to have a good grasp of your unique situation? Ask questions about processes that the facilitator likes to use and make sure you are comfortable with the answers. For example, some facilitators may use exercises that could be rejected by your group as too "touchy-feely." Choose a facilitator who is comfortable with your group's style. Other questions to consider are included in the sidebar on page 4. Since success depends on interpersonal skills, after doing a basic reference check, go with your gut reaction. Then allow the facilitator to use his or her skills to develop a working agenda for your retreat.

During the selection process, be sure to ask about fees. Some facilitators charge by the hour, but most charge a fixed fee for the entire retreat, including preparation, on-site time during the retreat, and preparation of a final report/action plan (if this has been agreed to in advance). Also be sure to discuss expenses in advance. If you agree to pay expenses, be clear about what expenses are reimbursable. For out-of-town facilitators, expect to pay mileage or airfare as well as lodging and meals. A local facilitator may not require expenses.

DEVELOP AN AGENDA

Developing a detailed agenda forces the planners to think about every hour of the retreat and ensures that time is used wisely. An agenda helps planners and participants to anticipate breaks, time for refreshments,

and other physical needs of the participants.

Many facilitators prefer to work from a draft agenda with specific time periods blocked and identified. This enables the facilitator to track whether the group is on target at any given time. It is usually not necessary to share all the details included in the draft agenda with participants. The sidebar on this page provides an example of an agenda used during a planning workshop retreat for The Woodlands Community Association in The Woodlands, Texas (Steven Burkett, president and CEO). The retreat was facilitated by Julia D. Novak (city manager of Rye, New York).

An agenda also reinforces the outcome and the steps that are anticipated to get there. As this example shows, the retreat's goals and norms are articulated.

Retreat agenda

Woodlands Community Association Planning Workshop Retreat, May 13, 2000

Facilitator: Julia D. Novak

Introductions

Welcome participants and make introductions.

- Explain norms and expectations for the retreat.

Role of the board

- Review concepts from Carver Governance Model.
- Articulate the role of the board.

Board/staff expectations

- Discuss the psychological contract and its implications for board/staff relations.
- Articulate mutual expectations.

Issues and priorities

- What are the key issues facing the Woodlands Community Association?
- What does the board need to focus on during the next twelve months in order to achieve the vision?
- Twelve months from now, how will we know if we have succeeded in making progress on priority issues?

Board norms and interactions

- Discuss the purpose of articulating norms.
- Agree on critical norms for the group.
- Evaluate performance on norms.

Next steps/closing

- Get to know each other better (team building).
- Get a sense of broader community issues.
- Clarify and articulate board priorities for the coming year.
- Develop norms and expectations for board interactions.
- Discuss and clarify the board's decision-making process.
- Articulate the role of the board in achieving the mission and vision of Woodlands Community Association.

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Like a road map, the agenda enables participants to see the path that will allow them to accomplish their work. If warranted by the discussion and agreed upon by the group, detours from the path may occur.

FIND AN OFF-SITE LOCATION

Although leaving the jurisdiction is sometimes not politically acceptable, it is advantageous to locate a retreat off-site. By meeting somewhere other than the regular council chambers or conference room, the group is less prone to “business as usual” and less likely to be distracted by outside influences. Many managers think an off-site location makes a retreat more productive.

Some facilitators report urging participants not to call the office on their breaks. Laudable in concept, this “rule” is difficult to enforce. However, being off-site does emphasize the importance of the work to participants and helps reduce their inclination to run back to the office or try to conduct regular business during the retreat.

Since appearances are important in the public context, the location of the retreat should be considered carefully. Beware of fostering the perception that the council is holding its retreat in the lap of luxury, for example. One Midwest jurisdiction flew its department heads to a California resort for a management retreat, and the press had a field day. State parks and universities may offer lower-cost alternatives and provide ideal facilities for retreats. Community centers and senior centers also can be good locations.

DEVELOP GROUND RULES

Before beginning work on the substance of the retreat, the group should agree on ground rules. Ground rules establish working assumptions about conduct and expectations and can be referred to as needed by the facilitator or group members. The ground rules used by the village of Clemmons, North Carolina, for its council retreat are shown in the accompanying sidebar. Although ground rules like these may seem like common sense (and definitely reflect common courtesy), they

Suggested ground rules for working groups

Ground rules are commitments made to one another by members of a working group that are designed to help the group function more effectively. The following are some that we have found to be useful to governing boards, not only in retreats, but also in the conduct of their regular business.

Share all relevant information. When the board is discussing an issue, it is helpful for the members to share all the information they have that is relevant to understanding the issue or solving the problem at hand. The information may be facts, feelings, reactions, opinions, etc. Each person must take responsibility for sharing whatever information he or she holds and not assume that others in the group know it already. The group cannot use it until it has it.

Be specific and use examples. Speaking in generalities often makes it difficult for others to understand because each person’s experience is different. Saying specifically what you mean increases the chances that you will be understood. Using an example can give each person who is listening a common reference point.

Test assumptions and inferences publicly. If someone makes a statement that seems to you to include an unsupported assumption, you can avoid a lot of misunderstanding by verifying that the person made that assumption and finding out why he or she made it. You can also test out your own assumptions by asking the group if your assumption is correct.

Define what important words mean. Often words mean different things to different people. If a word or a term is important in the discussion and if there seem to be different meanings applied to the word, it is usually worthwhile to stop and establish a common meaning for the whole group.

Discuss interests before positions are taken. People establish their positions on issues on the basis of their interests. However, it is sometimes possible for differing interests to be satisfied by a position or solution that nobody has thought of yet. To find out whether that is possible, people have to say what their interests are. On the other hand, if people just argue for their positions without stating their interests, it is often difficult or impossible to find a common solution that might meet everyone’s needs.

Don’t take cheap shots or in other ways distract the group. When members take cheap shots at one another, it often takes the group off track and distracts the member receiving the cheap shot. Likewise, the group may be distracted by side conversations or individuals doing “off-task” activities.

Compiled by Kurt Jenne, assistant director, Institute of Government, University of North Carolina, from a set of sixteen ground rules developed by Roger Schwarz and published in “Groundrules for Effective Groups,” in *Popular Government*, Vol. 54, no. 4 (Spring 1989): pp. 25-30. Reprinted by permission of the Institute of Government, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

can remind participants of agreed-upon behaviors when emotions heat up or discussions get contentious. Ideally, the facilitator gets buy-in from the group beforehand, and during the event keeps the ground rules posted in full view.

With groups that already have a proven track record of working well together, ground rules may seem superfluous. However, for groups that have not worked together before, or have a contentious working relationship, ground rules are essential. There is value in beginning with agreement. With some groups, this may be the one area that everyone agrees on throughout the day!

Some facilitators prefer to articulate norms for group interaction during the retreat instead of establishing ground rules beforehand. Sidebars on this page and on pages 8 and 9 show two sets of norms identified by the community association board in The Woodlands, Texas—the first are those that the participants agreed to use during the planning retreat. As part of their work at the retreat, the board then considered a longer set of norms and agreed to adopt a subset of them to govern their own interactions during subsequent meetings. As the sidebar shows, the board then went a step farther and rated its current performance compared with the norms it had just adopted. It is easy to see the value of this type of exercise by a board that wants to improve its interactions and communication.

ENCOURAGE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION THROUGHOUT THE RETREAT

The well-prepared facilitator begins the retreat with a good understanding of each of the participant's needs as well as each person's issues and concerns. A skilled facilitator executes the agenda and keeps the meeting flowing. He or she makes sure that all participants take an active role in discussions and that their opinions get heard. It is also the responsibility of the facilitator to help the group stick to the agenda and accomplish what it set out to do.

Retreat norms for participants

- Listen with respect...
 - ...no interrupting
 - ...no talking over
 - ...disagree agreeably
- Stay on task
- Value differences
- Be candid and honest
- Enjoy! Have a GOOD DAY
- No sidebar conversations.

From Woodlands Community Association, The Woodlands, Texas.

A skilled facilitator brings a “bag of tricks” to use as applicable. For example, such techniques as nominal group process, force field analysis, cause-and-effect diagrams (also known as fishbone diagrams) can be used very effectively, depending on the desired outcome of the group and the issue or problem being discussed. An experienced facilitator knows when to encourage consensus and when to allow participants to express themselves through a vote. This expertise helps ensure active participation and a good flow of ideas.

The facilitator usually builds in appropriate ice breakers or warm-up techniques to get the group talking at the beginning of the retreat. Warm-ups range from activities that help people to get to know each other on a personal level (like paired introductions or talking about personal experiences) to more work-oriented activities (like writing a short list of issues or prioritizing issues that were identified previously by the group). It is up to the facilitator to suggest these activities and get the group started successfully.

Another important role for the facilitator is to keep the group balanced and positive. Humor is useful in this regard. The facilitator does not need to be a stand-up comic, but he or she must be prepared to ease tension or bring the group together if the discussion gets too heavy or acrimonious. Laughter is often the quickest means to this end. Some facilitators use physical activities as tension breakers. They may ask everyone to line up and rub the back of the person in front of them or divide participants into different quadrants of the room to express opinions. Physical exercises, like jumping jacks or big arm circles, can bring relief in a tense setting.

Exercises that encourage creativity and fun can bring levity to a heavy issue-oriented agenda. An activity that stretches the imagination, like challenging small groups to find as many innovative uses as possible for a paper clip or toothpick (or any common item), can add humor to a meeting. Time must be considered, however, and there is a fine line between group “work” and frivolity. Again, a good facilitator knows when to inject ten minutes of a creative exercise into a packed agenda.

BE SPECIFIC ABOUT FOLLOW-UP

In order to ensure that the energy generated by the retreat does not dissipate and that the decisions that were reached are implemented, someone must document the results of the retreat and establish a timeline for action. Be sure to designate before the retreat the person who will be responsible for this task. If you are counting on the facilitator to produce a final report that summarizes the retreat, make sure that you've been explicit about that in advance.

Many facilitators build the reporting process into the structure of the retreat by publicly recording important decisions as they are made. Lists and notes

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made on a flip chart or large sheets of paper and posted around the room are helpful later for creating a report of the retreat's results. If appropriate to the purpose and nature of the retreat, participants can be given opportunities to annotate these public "minutes" during breaks, so that the record is further enhanced.

Ideally, the last item on the agenda will be a wrap-up that includes next steps and an implementation action plan. To the list of next steps, the implementation action plan attaches names of responsible persons, specific actions to be taken, and milestones (specific dates). Although some facilitators include an implementation plan as part of their assignment (working with the participants during the retreat to create the plan, or perhaps with the management team after the retreat), others may not. Be sure to discuss this with the facilitator in advance.

Regardless of who creates the follow-up plan, it is critical to the success of the retreat. When the retreat is over and participants go back to their "real" jobs, the implementation plan ensures that the ideas expressed during the retreat get put into action. The table on page 10 shows an action plan for two initiatives that were discussed during a retreat in a Midwest city. It identifies the specific actions to be taken, assigns responsibility for each action, and sets the date by which each step is expected to be accomplished.

The wrap-up also gives the retreat leader an opportunity to set the date (or dates) for follow-up meetings if they are required. If everyone at the retreat agrees on common goals and objectives, there will be momentum afterward to take specific actions (for example, attend future meetings or organize committees to follow up on work done at the retreat). Individuals or committees might agree to report back to the group within a certain time on the results of the investigation they have promised to undertake. The enthusiasm generated by the retreat can contribute to participants' willingness to volunteer for these assignments.

TYPES OF RETREATS

Council Retreats

Many managers hold annual planning retreats with their councils. Goal setting and strategic planning are two of the most common reasons for these retreats, but other topics could be addressed as well. Whenever a group could benefit from focusing on a particular issue or set of issues, a retreat could be useful.

In addition to focusing on issues, some councils conduct retreats to enhance communication among themselves and with staff. One council used a retreat as an opportunity to build rapport with a new man-

Retreat norms for board members

The Woodlands Community Association Board evaluated the following list of norms:

- To place cooperation, trust, and respect at the heart of all we do
- To behave ethically as we carry out our daily responsibilities
- To operate as an effective team, continually improving that effectiveness
- To work for win-win situations instead of win-lose situations
- To actively listen, keeping an open mind and suspending judgment
- To stay focused and avoid tangents
- To be proactive in the exercise of our office
- To do our best to answer questions posed by one another, our employees, and the community
- To honor "discussion" before "decisions"
- To focus policy making on important "ends" for our owners/customers
- To focus discussion of "means" by identifying unacceptable practices and trusting our staff to competently execute their responsibilities
- To be honest and candid with one another
- To give and take positive feedback and coaching
- To focus on working "with" instead of "for" or "under"
- To not take differences of opinion personally
- To disagree agreeably and professionally
- To realize that people make mistakes—forgive and forget
- To realize the virtue of debate and avoid the liability of argument
- To realize and honor varying work styles, personalities, and process needs
- To share information and avoid surprises
- To minimize the practice of "sign-offs" and ratify when needed
- To challenge and motivate one another.
- To maintain a sense of levity. Our service should be fun as well as work.

The board agreed to adopt the following norms to govern its interactions:

- To place cooperation, trust, and respect at the heart of all we do
- To work for win-win situations instead of win-lose situations
- To honor "discussion" before "decisions"
- To focus policy making on important "ends" for our owners/customers
- To be honest and candid with each other
- To share information and avoid surprises
- To maintain a sense of levity (humor).

ager and staff. In this case the newly appointed manager, top management, and council spent the retreat articulating expectations and getting to know each other better. The sidebar on page 11, a list of expectations the mayor and council articulated for the manager, was a product of the retreat.

Joint Retreat for Council and School Board

Another, more unusual type of retreat is one that brings two (or more) independent organizations together. The city of Martinsville, Virginia, holds an annual retreat with its school board to discuss current issues and enhance communication between the two governing bodies. Martinsville, like some jurisdictions in Virginia, has a school board that is appointed by the council but acts as an independent institution. The city council approves its budget yet has no line item authority and therefore no real control over the school board’s budget. This can lead to an acrimonious situation between the board and the council.

Martinsville’s city manager, Earl Reynolds Jr., is a strong believer in communication. Several years ago, when a new school superintendent arrived, Reynolds took the initiative and invited the superintendent and the school board to a retreat. The group (about 15 total including 5 members of each board, clerks of both gov-

erning boards as well as key staff) gathered together for one and one-half days off-site. A facilitator interviewed the board members in advance, planned the meeting, and assisted the group on-site. The retreat was so successful in improving communications and understanding between the groups that they have held joint retreats several times since then. The outcomes included a new level of mutual trust and respect, as well as the initiation of a partnering concept between board members that has also improved understanding. The sidebar pages 12 and 13 shows the decisions made during several joint planning retreats.

Team-Building Retreats

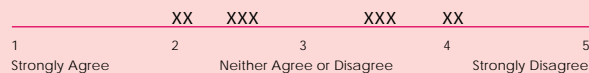
Team-building retreats differ from issue-based or planning retreats. When team building is the primary purpose, different techniques are usually used. Team building is sometimes less comfortable for participants than discussion of issues. Sometimes team-building exercises involve a physical component, like group challenges with obstacle courses, whitewater rafting, hiking, etc. Other team-building techniques, such as the Strength Development Inventory or Myers-Briggs indicators, are more cerebral and are useful when trying to develop a better understanding of team dynamics.

Kurt Bressner, the city manager of Downers Grove,

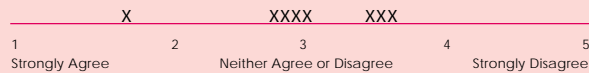
Evaluation of retreat norms for board members

The board rated itself on the norms it had chosen.

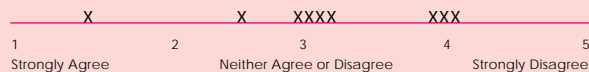
We place cooperation, trust, and respect at the heart of all we do



We work for win-win situations instead of win-lose situations

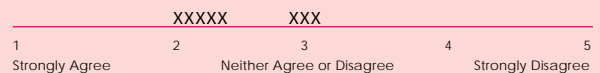


We honor "discussion" before "decisions"

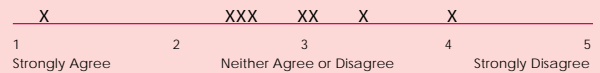


Source: Woodlands Community Association, The Woodlands, Texas.

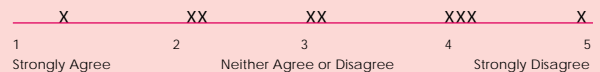
We focus policy making on important "ends" for our owners/customers



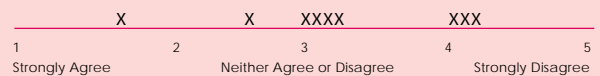
We maintain a sense of levity; our service is fun as well as work.



We are honest and candid with each other



We share information and avoid surprises



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Mistakes to avoid

Even when a retreat agenda is packed with work-related items and little or no recreational time has been allocated, managers need to be sensitive to perceptions by the public about how the jurisdiction spends its money. The following list is based on advice from managers about how to avoid unnecessary problems.

- Be aware of the retreat location and setting. A posh resort may draw criticism, so be sensitive to appearances. If you decide to leave town, think about the perception and expense involved with travel.
- Be aware of public open-meeting laws. You may need to announce the retreat well in advance, and you may have press coverage.
- Be careful of the perception that retreat participants are “knocking off on city time.” Although taking city staff on a retreat is likely to be highly productive and an excellent use of time, you may want to consider holding the retreat over a weekend, or at least including part of a weekend in your work.
- Don’t plan on tape recording or videotaping the retreat. Tape recorders inhibit discussion and may prevent participants from speaking freely. Since it is important to record decisions, have the facilitator be responsible for this task or ask someone else in the group to take charge of recording decisions.
- Avoid expecting too much in too short of a time. Timing is key, and it is important to allow adequate time for discussion and reflection. Be sensitive to how much work is, expected in the time you allocated.
- Be sure to plan adequate time for implementation and follow-up. Without implementation and a structured follow-up, there will be no clear relationship between the value of the retreat (and the work accomplished during the retreat) and progress toward those decisions.

Sample council retreat action plan

January 7-8, 2000

Action steps for telecommunications initiative

	Responsible person	Due date	Status*
1. Review other jurisdictions' cellular tower ordinances	Roberto Jones	February 15	
2. Develop a cellular towers ordinance	Roberto Jones	March 1	
3. Develop a glossary of telecommunications terms	Jane Smith	February 15	
4. Review other jurisdictions' telecommunications policies	Jane Smith	March 15	
5. Develop a telecommunications policy for the city	Jane Smith	April 1	

*The “Status” column is used to mark progress as the action plan is reviewed periodically.

Action steps for Web site initiative

	Responsible person	Due date	Status*
1. Research requirements to allow e-commerce transactions	Jim Donovan	February 15	
2. Develop prototype screens for paying traffic citations in line	Jim Donovan	May 1	
3. Develop capacity to allow all vendors to access city's purchasing site online	Wendy Root	April 1	

*The “Status” column is used to mark progress as the action plan is reviewed periodically.

Illinois, wanted to strengthen the relationship between staff and commissioners and ease the tension between them. He took the group on a wilderness trail obstacle course. The session, arranged through a local hospital that offered corporate training, was well planned and executed. Although Bressner recalls having to do “a little shuttle diplomacy” to get everyone to agree to the retreat, the staff and commissioners ultimately felt it was extremely successful. The commissioners got to know the staff in a more relaxed setting, and they could see firsthand how well the Downers Grove staff worked together. They also had a chance to experience something out of the ordinary and challenge themselves. Bressner, now the manager of Boynton Beach, Florida, feels that team-building retreats provide a worthwhile

experience and that it is money well spent. “I want to do the high ropes with the Boynton Beach staff and commissioners next,” he says.

Another team-building tool that many jurisdictions, including Downers Grove, have used successfully is the Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator. This tool is particularly useful when the group is discussing how to improve relationships and communication styles. Although some participants may be reluctant to reveal their preferences, confidentiality can be guaranteed. An overall discussion of different styles and how to work best with each type of personality can improve relationships and promote better understanding of individuals.

Sample retreat outcome: Council expectations for the city manager

Leadership

- In a city forum set issues straight when needed.
- Get out of the shadow of the former city manager and promote the emergence of your own style; be yourself in terms of skills, knowledge, and way of relating to mayor and council.
- Do what your background says you can do.
- Help develop policy; give the best advice possible.
- Make recommendations known.
- Advocate but don't expect the mayor and council to take your advice on all occasions.
- Be trustworthy and committed to excellence.
- Be here a long time; the city purchased what you have to offer: background, training, and a perspective that will be beneficial to the city.
- Turn up the microphone, speak out, don't convey passiveness.
- Assess the organization of the city—departments, board and commissions, appointed officials, etc.—and what improvements might be needed.
- Lay out a game plan for the future mayor and council to make the city an even better place.
- Help identify what the city needs to be doing that it currently is not.
- Communicate frequently—forward information (e-mail).

Management

- Somebody who is hands-on and does not delegate everything; use the skills/abilities of deputy city manager and know what is going on.
- Run the city—take care of day-to-day things.
- Provide, with deputy city manager, leadership to staff.
- Demand a high level of performance from city staff and departments.
- Communicate and build relationships with other department heads.
- Continue letting senior staff have input.
- Deal competently with the transition—change of relationship between acting/deputy manager and new city manager.

Interaction with community

- Be very visible in community.
- Be aware of the image that the city manager conveys to citizens; communicate respect.
- Remember that you are serving the citizens.

12 Inquiry Service Report

Joint city council–school board retreats

What follows is a composite of the agreements and understandings that the Martinsville city council and the Martinsville city school board adopted during joint retreats from 1993 through 1996. Each of these retreats was facilitated by R. David Blackman of Blackman and Associates of Greensboro, N.C. He documented each retreat, and representatives of the city and the public schools reviewed and edited the documentation before final copies were printed and distributed. Revisions and additions to these agreements made during subsequent joint retreats were incorporated in this document.

Visions

The two groups have not agreed upon formal goals for education; however, they identified concepts that all agreed should be included in the thinking of both groups as they evaluate the annual results of the educational thrusts of the city schools. In that light, schools should:

- Provide a safe environment for students and faculty
- Establish and meet standards for proficiency in reading, writing, and math
- Train students in practical life skills
- Create an atmosphere conducive to learning
- Assist students in the development of positive attitudes toward lifelong learning
- Seek broad community support for the goals and objectives of education
- Increase the public's awareness of the importance of education to the quality of life of Martinsville and its impact on economic development

Council–School Board Roles

Roles were identified. It falls to the city manager and the superintendent of schools to manage the relationships between the council and the school board. Agreement was reached on the following responsibilities.

Council responsibilities

- Provide funding for the budget of the Martinsville city schools
- Appoint members of the school board
- Define the terms of the school board members
- Establish standards for the selection of school board members
- Employ the city manager
- Establish the personnel policies for city employees
- Establish pay rates and scales for city employees
- Collaborate on policy matters that impact the council and the school board

School board responsibilities

- Establish policy for the operation of the Martinsville city schools
- Review, approve, and modify all school budgets
- Employ the superintendent of schools
- Oversee hiring and all personnel matters
- Establish the personnel policies of the Martinsville city schools
- Establish the pay scales of school employees
- Collaborate on policy matters that impact the council the school board, and the county public schools.

Building Good Relationships

The groups agree that there must be a continuous effort to improve their relationships. While the council's official role with the schools concludes with the appointment of the school board and the approval of the budget allocation, the relationship continues as both groups react to each other's needs and community input. The council's role as the taxation agent creates community pressures that the school board should recognize and appreciate. The groups agree that the following can assist in making their relationships better:

- Establish common systems for management and personnel matters
- Develop a common vision for education
- Encourage citizen input on education goals
- Increase the sharing of information about taxes, schools, personnel, etc.
- Hold regular joint meetings for educational and informational purposes
- Inform the public on school and tax matters and their interrelationship
- Increase one-on-one communications among council and school board members
- Develop a joint plan for providing public information to the community.

Council-School Board Budget Process

The development and implementation of the budget process create the greatest tension and potential for misunderstanding. During past retreats the council and the school board have agreed on the following principles regarding their common budgeting relationship:

- The schools will submit yearly budget requests to cover all programs funded in the previous year's budget.
- All budget requests for new programs for the budget year will be submitted as a supplemental request.
- Budget projections for the year will not include any pay adjustments.
- The school board will advise the council when it is implementing federal and state mandates.
- The school board will alert the council at the earliest possible time when variations are expected in its budget.
- The school board will see that supplemental appropriations are on the council's agenda.
- The school board will inform the council regarding future matters that are likely to impact budget allocations.
- The school board should seek contingency funding in its annual budget requests.
- Council and school board members will receive budget information by April 1 of each year.
- Work sessions will be held to review the budget and make adjustments before the budget comes formally to the council for adoption.
- The council will make allocations to the school board by May 1 of the budget year; knowing about budget changes will allow the schools to plan for personnel issues.
- The school board should develop, update, and submit a capital improvement budget each year.
- When programs funded with monies other than those allocated by the council are being discontinued or when programs are expected to lose their funding base, the school board will inform the council at the earliest possible time.
- The council and the school board will aggressively increase their joint lobbying efforts with the state to secure increased funding for capital projects.
- The school board should establish program priorities for its budget and identify the cost for the development and delivery of those services.
- Compensation issues will be reviewed as a percentage of current costs.
- Both the council and the school board will work at sharing budget and program information in preliminary exchanges of information so that surprises are eliminated during the budget development phase.
- The council and the school board will work to agree on strategies that will allow the implementation of long-term plans in the city schools.
- Formal communications among council members and the school board will be by written memos, with copies distributed by each group's chairperson. Informal communications among group members will be designed around a "buddy system" to encourage regular sharing of information and concerns.

Source: Prepared for the city council of Martinsville and Martinsville city school board by R. David Blackman and Associates, Greensboro, N.C.

CONCLUSION

A retreat is an important tool in a leader's arsenal. A well-run retreat can define the agenda for the group, build consensus around agenda elements, develop team buy-in and support for the ideas that will drive the organization, and create an implementation action plan. In short, it can be an excellent tool for a variety of group situations.

Since so much of the work in a jurisdiction is done by groups (whether it is the council, the commission, the management team, or appointed decision-making bodies), good working relations are essential for productivity. The retreat enables a group to step back from its regular business and take time to focus on issues that might never be examined or addressed otherwise. A retreat is especially valuable if conflict among group members is hindering productivity. A facilitator can help the group work through its conflicts and emerge

a stronger team. A good facilitator can even teach participants how to deal with unproductive conflict if it should arise again.

Planning is key to a retreat's success. Identifying a good facilitator who will guide the preparations and on-site work is an extremely important step, as is the development of an agenda that reflects the outcomes the group wants to achieve. As these tasks are being accomplished, off-site locations can be researched. Once all of these elements are decided on, the retreat is in the "go" mode. The facilitator will then take over, working with the group to develop ground rules and encouraging active involvement by all participants so that the agenda of the retreat can be followed. As the hard, rewarding work of the retreat comes to an end and hands are shaken and good-byes are spoken, one last task remains: a follow-up action plan must be created to ensure that the decisions made on the retreat are documented and implemented.

The Retreat as
Management Tool

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