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Perfect retreat more than just a meet and greet

A successful corporate retreat for partners and employees requires considerable planning so it can be used as an opportunity to shape the strategy of the firm rather than simply being an expensive exercise that has minimal long-term impact, writes Joel Barolsky.

Are you planning to run a partners' retreat, or a conference for the team? As a facilitator of many retreats, I thought you might find these six design principles helpful in crafting your agenda.

#1 Open eyes

The retreat needs to go beyond the regular monthly performance update. It should open partners' eyes to the true strategic health of the firm – the good, the bad and the ugly. The aim should be to tell the truth in a constructive and considered way. A glossy state of the nation address serves no one's interests.

As a practical example of this, I was once engaged to interview 10 clients, 10 competitors and five consultants to provide a fresh independent perspective on how a particular firm was positioned to meet the challenges of the Australian legal market. This strategy health check yielded a rich discussion on the firm's distinctive strengths, as well as one or two blind spots.

#2 Open minds

Many professionals are trained sceptics. This scepticism, coupled with stellar career success, leads to very conservative thinking and behaviour – what's worked in the past will be the foundation of success into the future. This mindset is dangerous in a rapidly changing, intensely competitive environment.

Some of the best retreats I've been at have included 'light-bulb' presentations from outsiders to open partner' minds to fresh perspectives and methods. These outsiders have included, in descending order of impact, leaders of successful peer firms, key clients, heavy hitters from industry, respected alumni, market commentators, researchers and content experts.

Another approach I've seen work really well is to run live 'what-if' simulations. The firm's P&L is presented and then a series of scenarios presented to demonstrate the long-term impact on partners' income. The discussion then opens up and what-if questions are simulated and the results revealed. This is partly firm economics 101 in disguise, but also it's a really useful way to show the long-term impact of things such as margin erosion, cost containment, staff engagement and strategic investments or divestments.

#3 Open hearts

"Building relationships with colleagues," often tops the best things list in post-retreat feedback. As firms grow in size and footprint, it gets harder for partners to partner. They simply do not know their colleagues, what they're like as people, what they're really good at and how they might add value to clients.

Structuring (but not over-structuring) social time and activity is critical. It amazes me how often firms will book retreats at expensive resorts with glorious recreational facilities and then spend 95 per cent of the time in meeting rooms observing other guests enjoying them.

#4 Open questions

Retreats are often good opportunities to work *on* the business and solicit partner views as owners and stewards of the firm. One constructive way to address this is to ask a few carefully crafted open questions and to structure a debate around these dilemmas. For example, *"Gilbert + Tobin partners have invested in an online legal service provider called LegalVision. This has provided G+T a hedge against disruption and a way to innovate without changing the core business. Should we do the same?"*

These open question sessions can be set up with a presentation of relevant background data and commentary. The key is to let the discussion be open and unstructured while at the same time keeping it insightful, strategic and relevant.

#5 Open doors

Almost every retreat I've attended starts out by welcoming new partners – both internal appointments and lateral hires. Other than a cursory mention of their name, not much else is done to truly open the door to those joining the club. I think this is a missed opportunity to get fresh perspectives on the firm and to avoid group think.

One firm I know asks all their lateral hires to do a short presentation comparing their old firm to the new on five dimensions: culture, governance, pricing, work practices and strategy. This is really helpful in three ways: profiling competitors, benchmarking and showcasing their new partners.

#6 Open bar

A client recently suggested a sixth factor to advance a retreat: *An open bar*. Their experience was that the bar was the place that much of the truth-telling and bonding actually happened. While the culture of drinking varies from firm to firm, it is worth thinking about.

In conclusion

While retreats can be a black hole in terms of time and dollars, many successful firms continue to see a return from this type of investment. The trick is not to view it as an extended partners' meeting but rather as a major opportunity to build the spirit and the strategy of the partnership.

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