

Going Forward with Partner Retreats

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Partner retreats provide the time and setting so that a firm's decision makers can focus on the challenging work of identifying, clarifying and exploring tough issues such as growth, merger, change, recruitment and client management. A retreat can add value when the decision makers commit to the ideas that are introduced, examined, prioritized, agreed to and deemed necessary.

The mandate of a well-planned retreat is to put tough decisions in front of the firm's decision makers, engage their full participation and define commitments clearly enough so that execution is the logical and agreed-upon next step. A retreat is about making tough business decisions, but decisions that are based on an understanding of how the profession and the marketplace are changing and what the choices are. A retreat buys very little unless at its conclusion each person knows who must do what and that everyone is prepared to actually do what they have committed to. In other words, the partners are willing to be managed. That takes clarity, prioritization, accountability, follow-up and timelines.

The Risk of Failure

Retreats cannot create value for a firm unless participants identify desired outcomes clearly and follow-up to ensure outcomes are met. Defining target outcomes that are SMART – specific, measurable, agreed upon, realistic and timed – creates rigorous discussion and shared pictures of what must get done post-retreat. By being clearly defined, those decisions lead to an action plan and are likely to be acted upon. A retreat fails if it surfaces great ideas and gets participants talking but not executing.

Planning

Planning maximizes a retreat's value. It identifies the firm's priorities and objectives and creates a retreat structure that will generate perspectives, concerns and commitments. The planning process encourages early thinking so that the group can work together to brainstorm, challenge, discuss and eventually consolidate the best ideas and action plans.

Preemptive thinking gives the participants time to identify and

examine issues they consider particularly important. For ideas to be shared, participants can clarify data and their perspectives by discussing some of their views with other participants in advance of the retreat. By starting the thinking before the actual retreat date, the contributions at the meeting become richer. Planning begins the coalition building that can allow retreat discussions and activities to develop into meaningful commitments. Planning involves gathering, examining and consolidating individuals' ideas and perspectives:

- What are the priorities of the meeting for the firm and for each individual?
- What issues will be discussed, and what kinds of outcomes will exist as a result of those discussions?
- What are the differing perspectives?
- What decisions will get made?

If the retreat planners know the target outcomes, which issues need discussion, which are contentious and which are already well defined, the planning team can develop an agenda that allocates appropriate timeframes

to high-priority topics and ones where differences must be worked on to develop consensus.

Conduct

Retreats should include structured, facilitated discussions and activities designed to engage decision makers in sharing information, perspectives, frustrations and insights. There should be enough time, casual interaction and activities for participants to relax, allow thinking to develop and cultivate positive relationships. Activities might include structured processes for introducing conflicting perspectives, reviewing client feedback, rethinking market position and specialty niches, and challenging the status quo.

During the retreat, discussions can become intense. They should encourage every participant to identify concerns, fears and misgivings about the issues being discussed and also to defend favored options and perspectives. The group can then identify good ideas, reshape flawed ones and build a few high-value ideas for action.

At retreat's end, the firm must develop and publish its plan to enable commitment follow-up. Commitments will not be executed unless specific action steps are identified, accountability is assigned and timeframes are established.

Facilitation

Prudent firms will have a facilitator to guide discussions, one who knows how and when to let ideas surface and be examined versus when to move on. This facilitator shepherds discussions into decisions and helps the group define concrete action steps. The right facilitator can keep the group focused on important issues, move the retreat forward, assist with making difficult decisions and provide expertise and knowledge where required.

An outside facilitator can help the planning team by conducting pre-retreat interviews. He/she can surface where core agreement and nuances deserve to be explored and where disagreements need to be examined and resolved. The facilitator can recommend discussions and structured activities for the retreat agenda, making sure the meeting remains focused and the defined outcomes are achieved.

Follow-Up

Once the retreat has ended and the commitments, not just activities, become clear, the group should post its summary and action plans and ensure someone from the group promptly issues a copy of the follow-up plan. Creating a follow-up at the end of the retreat creates closure and makes commitments visible. Follow-up also makes it less likely that the retreat leads to a flurry of tasks and activities, rather than to execution

creating outcomes of value. Firm retreats should be focused on implementation plans and schedules, the time for each partner to successfully complete his/her required contribution.

Evaluation

What happened as a result of the retreat? Who did what, and how did the execution of the plan developed at the retreat help the firm reach its goals? Obviously, the retreat needs to be evaluated. Evaluating a retreat can create discomfort. But if the retreat successfully identifies a few key decisions, develops agreement and defines the execution plan, information can be used for planning the next retreat. 🧩

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