

Chapter 1

Working with the Client

If you earn your living facilitating retreats, you've probably noticed that not everyone thinks a retreat is the greatest thing since microwave popcorn.

When your client announces, "We're going to have a retreat," you can't expect universally positive responses. Some people will love the idea of dedicating time to talking about new ideas and maybe hanging out with more senior leaders. Others will dread the very same things. Some will recall successful retreats they've attended. Others will remember bad experiences they've had or heard about.

Retreats can make people feel vulnerable. Your client may say, "We want to hear the truth," but not every participant will believe that. Some may remember the time Sali Ann spoke out at a retreat and shortly afterward was abruptly dismissed for reasons that were never disclosed.

And many might recall that after the last retreat they attended, nothing changed—except they had more work waiting on their desks when they returned to the office.

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

Retreats often require an overnight stay; managing the logistics of being away from home can be difficult for some people.

Retreats are expensive. In addition to the costs of a site, meals and lodging, and transportation (and your fees, if you’re external), organizations must tap their most valuable asset, staff time.

Moreover, retreats require a commitment to follow through after the participants return to work. The seeds planted at a retreat must be nurtured before the fruit can be harvested. If there is no follow-through, people will have spent many hours behind the plow for nothing.

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

So why should your client incur the costs and take the risks? And why on earth would you want to get involved?

As we like to explain to our clients, retreats are investments in an organization’s future. Unlike meetings, which typically focus on current issues and con-

The Terms We Use

- For the sake of simplicity, clarity, and grammar, we will use *he* and *she* interchangeably when referring to the client, facilitator, and others. Our use of these personal pronouns is completely arbitrary; both men and women play all roles in retreats.
- We use the terms *retreat*, *offsite*, and *offsite retreat* interchangeably.
- We use the word *client* to refer to the person who is convening the retreat and who has the power to approve the participants’ recommendations. He or she may be a team leader, division chief, CEO, executive director, board chair . . . you get the idea.

All the stories in this book are real, though names and other identifying data of individuals and companies have been changed to preserve our clients’ confidentiality.

“Retreats” That Aren’t Really Retreats

Many executives think that having a retreat with no other purpose than bringing people together on a regular basis is a good practice at best and harmless at worst. It is neither. A retreat is not a company picnic, a party, a “town hall” meeting, or an executive briefing session. Referring to such events as retreats gives retreats a bad name. Participants in a retreat without a clear business-related purpose may see the offsite as a waste of valuable time that might otherwise have been spent doing “real” work.

cerns, retreats take a longer view and focus on deeper, longer-term issues. Thus, although some up-front investment is required and there are various risks, the potential payoff of retreats is considerable.

And it’s a wonderful feeling knowing that you have helped an organization get back on track and have contributed to a more rewarding and productive workplace for its employees.

Differences Between Retreats and Meetings.

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

Nine Reasons to Hold a Retreat

1. *To Explore Fundamental Concerns*

Suppose turnover in your client's organization is exceptionally high or staff morale low. Or the organization has seen a significant drop-off in customers or an increase in their complaints. A retreat can be the ideal forum to explore and address the underlying causes.

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

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

3. *To Foster Change*

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

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

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

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

Executives cannot turn organizations around by fiat. People will change only when they see that it is important to do so. Retreats provide a forum for discussions about the reasons for and the urgency of a desired change. When people play a role in deciding what should be improved, they are more committed to ensuring that the change effort succeeds.

6. *To Transform the Organization's Culture or Improve Relationships Hindering Its Effectiveness*

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

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

Much of the tension that exists in organizations stems not from inherent personality conflicts but rather from individuals pursuing their own (and sometimes conflicting) visions of what is best for the organization. These visions often clash with one another because none of them necessarily represent the complete picture of an organization's circumstances. Retreats can foster alignment by helping participants understand and build commitment to the organization's overall priorities. Greater understanding and commitment encourages individuals to hold themselves accountable for the organization's success, not just the interests of their own work groups.

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

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

9. *To Make Tough Decisions*

Leaders often confront very tough decisions: Should they eliminate a signature product or service? Close down a particular operation? Reduce staff? Change the nature of a long-standing alliance? There will be greater commitment to the eventual course of action if many people from different levels in the organization have participated in



CD A1, "Is a Retreat Right for Your Organization?" lists reasons to hold and not to hold a retreat in a format that you can reproduce for your client.

deciding what to eliminate or change and how to go about doing so, rather than simply being told by the leaders what to do. At a well-led retreat, leaders receive the benefit not only of broad participation in idea generation but also of better decisions, because the group collectively will have a wider perspective and a greater number of ideas than the leader does alone.

Ten Reasons Not to Hold a Retreat

A retreat is not the best means of responding to every situation and addressing every concern a client might have.

We believe the potential for more harm than good exists if the client isn't willing to allow the kind of open and passionate discussion that is a hallmark of a good retreat. If he has a secret agenda, isn't willing to be influenced, or sees the

What Can a Retreat Achieve?

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

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

How many retreat facilitators does it take to change a light bulb? Just one, but the light bulb has to really want to change.

retreat as a panacea, a reward for the staff, or a ritual to endure before moving ahead with his own predetermined plans, the retreat is not likely to be a success. We recommend that you not agree to facilitate a retreat if you believe your potential client has any of these aims:

1. *To Improve Morale Through the Retreat Alone*

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

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

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

3. *To Discover and Punish Non-Team Players*

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

4. *To Advance a Covert Agenda*

If your client tries to pursue an agenda that is different from the retreat's stated purpose, she will undermine trust in herself personally as well as in the organization. It is far better for the leader to tell participants that she has decided, for example, to cut a department's head count and to ask for their help in determining the best way to handle layoffs than for her to try to manipulate them during

the retreat into endorsing her idea. When people figure out what their boss is up to (and they will!), it will foster resentment and engender much more resistance to her ideas than she would encounter if she had been truthful all along.

5. *To Control the Conversation*

It's counterproductive for your client to try to control what is said or who is authorized to say what. Your client must understand that just because something isn't said out loud doesn't mean that people aren't thinking it. Trying to direct what participants talk about deprives your client of strategic information he needs to make informed decisions. Putting everything out on the table and having a candid dialogue about participants' perceptions and misperceptions is better for your client and for the organization as a whole than trying to stop people from saying what's on their minds.

6. *To Squelch Conflict*

Some people relish conflict, but most dread it. Typically, the more people care about each other, the more averse they are to confronting conflict openly. But aiming to avoid conflict at all costs will practically guarantee that it will crop up in some form or another and that it won't be managed effectively. Successful retreats almost always involve surfacing and dealing with disagreements, disputes, or differences of opinion. If no conflict emerges, chances are participants are not being honest with themselves or with others or that the retreat is not focused on issues that are of great concern to them. Conflict is inevitable (and actually healthy) when people care about something. Your client should understand that it's key not to ignore or dismiss it. Instead, she should take advantage of your expertise to find ways of managing conflict so that its underlying causes can be explored openly.

7. *To Create a Platform for the Client's Own Ideas*

Retreats provide a valuable opportunity for leaders to hear from others. Coach your clients not to squander it by doing too much of the talking themselves. It is best for leaders mostly to listen to what others have to say, and to repress their inclination to lead discussions, persuade others, and resolve disputes.

8. *To Disregard What Participants Recommend*

There is nothing more demoralizing to participants than being led to believe that they have a role in the decision-making process, only to learn that key decisions were preordained. Participants will naturally expect that their leader will take their advice into consideration before reaching a decision, and that if he doesn't accept their recommendations he will explain why. If an executive asks participants to rubber-stamp decisions that he has already made, or if after the retreat he announces and attributes to the participants decisions they didn't make or ideas they didn't generate, the effect is likely to be very destructive.

9. *To Defend the Client's Point of View, Promote the Client's Position, or Maintain the Status Quo*

Retreats are associated with change in most people's minds. If your client wants things to stay the same, she should have a meeting to encourage everyone to keep up the good work or throw a party to thank everybody for a job well done. We advise our clients to reserve retreats for times when they'd like things to be different. And remember, the first person who is likely to have to change is your client. If you detect no willingness to explore more productive leadership practices on her part, discourage her from holding a retreat.

10. *To Merely Keep Up the Tradition of Having Annual Retreats*

Many clients think that having a retreat with no other purpose than to bring everyone together on some regular basis is a good practice at best and harmless at worst. It is neither. A retreat is not a company picnic. Frivolous offsites give retreats a bad name. We urge our clients not to plan retreats unless they have serious purpose in mind.

And, for us, a retreat is not a conference. A parade of presentations by in-house or outside experts can provide valuable information or training, but it doesn't constitute a retreat. It's certainly important that people be well informed, but a retreat—at least as we use the term in this book—is about sparking change, not just absorbing or exchanging information.

This isn't to say that we're against an "annual" retreat if it serves a serious purpose. Your client might be able to take advantage of a tradition of holding regular retreats to accomplish some important things. No matter how retreats may have been conducted in the past, you can work with your client to structure the next one to address key issues that are of genuine concern to him and to the participants.

We believe you can't be successful as a retreat facilitator unless you are willing to walk away from a client, no matter how potentially lucrative, if a retreat is not the right tool for the organization at the time.

When Is a Retreat Not the Right Tool?

Don't agree to facilitate a retreat if your client intends to

- Use the offsite just to improve morale
- Reward people for their hard work
- Punish non-team players
- Advance a covert agenda
- Control the conversation
- Avoid conflict
- Create a platform for her own ideas
- Disregard what participants recommend
- Defend his point of view, promote his position, or maintain the status quo
- Merely keep up the tradition of having annual retreats

What If the Client Is Your Boss?

We recommend, if at all possible, that you avoid facilitating a retreat for your supervisor. It is almost impossible to be perceived as neutral under these circumstances, and few internal facilitators feel comfortable standing up forcefully to their boss when the boss's behavior is hampering the group's effectiveness.

It is far better to ask an internal facilitator who does not report to your boss to lead the retreat, to partner with an external facilitator who won't have the same credibility issues vis-à-vis your supervisor or the group, or to leave the facilitation entirely to an external facilitator.



For guidelines on how internal facilitators can contract with their supervisors, see *The Skilled Facilitator*, by R. M. Schwarz (1994, pp. 289–293).

Aligning Yourself with the Client

Although it is your responsibility to design and lead the retreat, you must be fully aligned with your client—the person who has called for the retreat to take place. Otherwise you may end up with a design that's elegant but inappropriate. No matter how well or how often you design and lead retreats, you cannot afford to plunge ahead with your vision at the expense of your client's. Keep in mind that you have never designed this particular retreat before. However many successes you have enjoyed in the past, each retreat is an adventure into uncharted territory.

But what if your client isn't sure what he wants? Beware of trying to design and lead a retreat with no explicit change goal.

In some situations the client will be your primary contact; in others he will delegate that responsibility to someone else, such as the director of human resources. Even if the client wants you to work closely with another person when you are planning the retreat, however, you must have sufficient access to the client throughout the process so you can be sure that you are working to meet his expectations, not someone else's understanding or interpretation of his wishes.

It is equally important that you and the client agree that you will plan and facilitate the retreat with the organization's and the participants' overall interests in mind, not just the client's. The client should be willing to have you inform

the participants that you are working on everyone's behalf. He should understand that the offsite will fail if it is seen merely as a tool to advance his own agenda.

You and the client must be clear about what you expect of one another.

The client, for instance, has the right to expect that your retreat plan will

The terms *agreed-on outcomes* and *desired outcomes* refer in general to what the client and the participants want to be different as a result of the work done at the retreat and to why the client wants to hold a retreat. They do not suggest any specific decisions or recommendations the client might have in mind.

- Be suitable for the participants, taking into consideration their level of experience and expertise and their comfort level with certain types of activities
 - Focus sharply on delivering the agreed-on outcomes (based on the client's goals and what you learn from your pre-retreat interviews or surveys)
 - Engage the participants, so they are strongly committed to the decisions or recommendations they make
 - Use participants' time wisely
 - Allow for changes if something unexpected happens, but still move the group toward the desired outcomes
- Include time to discuss how decisions reached or recommendations made at the retreat will be implemented and integrated into the organization's work

You also need commitments from the client, particularly that

- He has no hidden agenda. If he hopes certain decisions will come from the participants, he has to let go and see if his hopes are realized—and be willing to proceed even if they are not.
- You will have access to him and other retreat participants in advance to solicit their input.
- He will make available to you all relevant documents (such as staffing patterns, organization charts, previous studies, internal and external surveys, reports from other retreats, and the like) that you might need.
- He intends to implement the action plans agreed to.
- Participants will not be punished (by him or anyone else in the organization) for expressing their opinions.
- You will have the freedom to “design in the moment” to ensure that the retreat stays on track toward meeting its goals.

- You will not be asked to violate participants' confidentiality or make an assessment of any individual's loyalty, competence, potential, or behavior.

Urge your client to express his desired outcomes for the retreat in observable terms so that both you and he will be able to tell whether these outcomes have been achieved. Desired outcomes shouldn't be a hidden agenda. Your client should be willing to disclose his overall goals for the retreat to the participants.

You may need to ask him some pointed questions to make sure you'll be helping the group address core issues, not merely symptoms of the problems they're experiencing. Facilitators are often presented with issues that appear to be process problems ("Wayne and Andrés don't get along with each other") when what is underneath may be a much more basic problem ("Wayne and Andrés don't agree on the priorities for our business").

You will need an explicit understanding from the client about the kinds of decisions that can be made at the retreat. Participants are often asked to come up with new ideas without being given the authority to make final decisions about what will be implemented. If this is the case the client will have to make the boundaries clear to the participants up front, saying, for instance, "At this retreat we're going to explore issues and come up with alternatives to resolve them, but we won't make the final decisions about how to proceed. Our recommendations will go to Stan and the rest of the management team for their consideration."

It's very important that you and the client understand one another's roles and that you trust each other. It's critical, for example, that the client accept that you will be leading the retreat and that he will be a participant. You don't want to find yourself in a situation where you are engaged in a tug-of-war with the client in front of the group. Discuss this thoroughly in advance with your client. How and when will you give your client feedback if you see him doing something that could endanger the retreat's success? (We encourage you to print out Chapter 16, "Your Role at the Retreat," from the CD, and ask your client to look it over; it can focus this dialogue.)

Make sure the client knows how you plan to lead the retreat. He may not like surprises. Discuss with him the extent of your participation.

For instance, because we conduct many creative thinking retreats, we have sharpened our own skills at generating innovative, even off-the-wall ideas that

in turn often spark even better ideas from the participants. We need to know whether the client would like us to contribute ideas or just facilitate the participants' idea-generating process.

When we take an active part, the organization often ends up with more diverse ideas, but sometimes the client (or the group) does not want the facilitator involved with the issues. If we think we have content expertise to offer in a given situation, we discuss in advance with the client and, if possible, the group what role they want us to play, instead of simply jumping in and offering our expertise.

You cannot forecast every situation that will occur at a retreat, so it is critical that you and your client talk about anything that either of you is concerned about. You must understand one another, and both you and your client must feel comfortable with how you will handle unexpected situations that might occur. Know your client's hot-button issues. What are the sensitive topics on which you will need his guidance? How will he respond to negative feedback from participants? How will you and he check in with one another during the retreat to make sure you are on track with his expectations? There will often be little time to confer with your client if a discussion suddenly takes a turn he does not like, so you should know in advance how you will handle such situations.

Checklist for Partnering Effectively with Your Client

Here are some questions we keep in mind to ensure that our relationship with the client is on track:

- Are we clear on exactly who our client is within the organization?
- Are the client's expectations of us clear? Do we know what specifically the client wants from us?
- Do we and the client agree on the outcomes for the retreat?
- Are we and the client in alignment about the balance between the business concerns and the interpersonal issues that will be addressed at the retreat?

- Will the client respect our need to protect the confidentiality of the people we interview?
- Do we and the client concur on whose desires and needs should be taken into account in planning the retreat?
- Does what the client want or need from a facilitator match our skills? Can we deliver the results the organization requires?
- Can we be open with this client? (Or do we feel the need to impress him or her or to hide our concerns?)
- Are we neutral about the culture (rather than being staked in particular outcomes)?
- Do our personalities fit well with the client's? (Do we and the client like one another? Do we and the client trust one another? Are we and the client candid with one another? Do we want the client to succeed?)
- Do both we and the client feel free to walk away from this relationship if it's not productive? (Or are we financially overdependent on the client? Or is the client overdependent on our expertise and unwilling to do the hard work himself or herself?)
- Does the client seem to value our perspective and expertise?
- Does the client seem interested in his or her potential contribution to issues the organization is facing?
- Is the client willing to listen to our questions and concerns?
- Does the client have realistic expectations of us (and of the retreat) in terms of our ability to "fix" the organization?
- Do we and the client see one another as partners? (Or is there a hierarchical relationship?)
- Is the client willing and able to give us access to people (including key decision makers) and information so we can understand the full picture?
- Does the retreat seem more important to us (or to others in the organization) than it is to the client?
- Are the budget and the time allocated for the retreat sufficient for the agenda the client has in mind?
- Do we have enough access to the client to get our needs met and our questions answered?
- Is the client willing to take prudent risks for the good of the organization?
- Is the client willing to change?
- Is the client committed to implementing what is agreed to at the retreat?



We know of no better resource to guide you in contracting with your client than Peter Block's classic text, *The Flawless Consulting Fieldbook & Companion* (2001).

Kinds of Retreats

You will need to ascertain from your client the kind of retreat he or she is planning to convene. There are many kinds of retreats, each with its own characteristics and special planning concerns that you will have to take into account as you develop your retreat design. Some of the most common are described in the following section.

Executive

In an executive retreat top managers get together without other employees, usually to chart strategic direction, measure progress against goals, foster teamwork within their group, establish new priorities, or make key decisions. The CEO frequently takes the lead in setting the retreat agenda.

Board or Board and Staff

Board retreats typically are used to align the actions of the staff with the priorities set by the board or to help the board members understand strategic and operational issues faced by the staff. Because of this board-staff interrelationship, such retreats usually include some or all of the organization's senior staff in addition to the board members. Occasionally a board will want to hold a retreat without any staff members present. That might occur if the board is focusing on sensitive topics such as its own dynamics or effectiveness, its relationship with the senior staff, or the need for succession planning in a founder-run organization.

Single Department

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

Interdepartmental

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

Teamwork

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

Associations and Membership Organizations

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

Customer or Vendor

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

Whole System

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

Creativity

Organizations are increasingly using retreats to spark creative thinking about their products, services, and processes. Specialists in creativity often lead these retreats, sometimes at facilities designed for that purpose. A creativity segment may also be a component of another kind, such as a strategic planning retreat in which participants learn creative thinking techniques and then immediately apply them to solve real problems.

Fixed Format

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

Using a Specialized Retreat Format

Some clients will have a particular specialized retreat format in mind. They may propose that you facilitate a prepackaged methodology designed to address issues that are common to most organizations. Typically, such a specialized format can be used either by itself or in conjunction with custom-designed segments.

We believe that the best retreats are tailor-made to fit an organization's specific needs, and in Chapters 3 and 4 we'll walk you step-by-step through the process of planning and custom designing a retreat that will get results.

We have, however, successfully integrated specialized retreat formats into longer retreats when we felt that this would be the best means of addressing the organization's concerns.

Certain specialized retreat formats require that the facilitator be trained and certified in their methodology. Thus, if a client requests one of these specialized formats or if you are interested in using one, you will have to become certified or work with another facilitator who is certified to lead it.

What follows is not a comprehensive list of specialized formats, but it will give you an idea of the choices available for you to consider.

Specialized Retreat Formats

Large system interventions. A large group of participants (perhaps 100 or more), representing a broad range of stakeholders, work through a predesigned methodology.

Open Space Technology. Participants design their own agenda at the retreat itself.

World Café. Participants engage in a series of rotating conversations about topics of significant interest to them.

Simulations. Participants engage in highly realistic exercises that provide a springboard for assessing organizational issues.

Appreciative inquiry. Participants build on past successes to create plans for the future.

Outdoor experiences. Participants engage in exercises that require them to work as a team.

Work-Out. A structured process guides participants to suggest performance improvements.

Large System Interventions

Large system interventions are sessions in which many people—often more than a hundred—representing many different segments of an organizational system (and sometimes the entire organization) gather to explore and plan for change.

One of the best-known large system interventions is the three-day Future Search. Although the originators describe Future Search as a conference or meeting, its highly experiential approach makes it very similar to a retreat.

What is unusual about a Future Search conference is that stakeholders from all groups affected by the organization participate. For a nonprofit health clinic, for instance, participants might include not only the clinic's leaders, but also board members, employees, patients (including former patients and potential patients), referral sources, government health officials, volunteers, individual donors, clinic neighbors, representatives of charitable foundations, complementary services such as food banks and housing agencies, media, vendors, churches, and other organizations that serve the same constituency.



If you want to learn more about Future Search, we recommend *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities*, by Marvin R. Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (1995). If you are considering using this technology, however, we strongly advise you to get trained by one of the founders. See also www.futuresearch.net.

Having all these voices in one room for a concentrated focus can have a major impact on the organizations involved, helping them find common ground and new ways to support one another's work.

Open Space Technology



Harrison Owen does not certify facilitators. He offers his methodology for anyone who cares to learn it by reading his books *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* (1997) and *Expanding Our Now: The Story of Open Space Technology* (1997). Nevertheless, Open Space requires a specific set of conditions for success and expert, confident facilitation.

Open Space is a method developed by organization consultant Harrison Owen. In Open Space participants design and conduct their own retreat sessions. Open Space is particularly appropriate for retreats where, as Owen says in his book *Open Space Technology* (1997b, p. 15), "A diverse group of people must deal with complex and potentially conflicting material in innovative and productive ways. It is particularly powerful when nobody knows the answer and the ongoing participation of a number of people is required to deal with the questions."

At the beginning of an Open Space session the participants themselves determine the topics they would like to address and the individuals who will convene various subgroups to discuss each topic. Then participants decide which subgroups they will take part in to discuss the issues that are most important to them. This sounds (and sometimes seems) chaotic, but it takes place in a well-structured environment. There is a formal process for involving the entire group in the work that has taken place in the individual sessions, so all participants have the opportunity to discuss any topic.

Open Space is not suitable for every situation. It will not work in an organization where the leader wants to maintain tight control. It yields a different result than tightly structured retreats do, one that often can't be foreseen but that does very accurately reflect the group's concerns.

World Café

World Café is a method developed by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs for creating collaborative dialogue.

The format is flexible and can be used for groups of any size as long as there are at least twelve participants. There are seven guiding principles for facilitating an effective World Café:

- Clarify the context.
- Create a hospitable environment.
- Explore questions that matter.
- Encourage everyone's contribution.
- Connect diverse perspectives.
- Listen together for insights and deeper questions.
- Harvest and share collective discoveries.

The World Café conversations take place in small groups of four to five participants. Participants talk about issues that matter to them and to the organization and they draw their key ideas on paper tablecloths. In the course of several rounds of conversation, people move from table to table, carrying themes from their previous conversations with them. In a whole group conversation at the end, participants share key themes and insights.

Much like Open Space, World Café is not suitable for environments where there is a predetermined answer, where detailed information gathering and action planning is the goal, or where the time for conducting the conversations is very limited. It works very well, however, when the group wants to explore a topic in depth and increase buy-in for the outcomes.



For more information on this methodology consult *The World Café: A Resource Guide for Hosting Conversations That Matter*, by Juanita Brown and The World Café Community (2002), and also visit www.theworldcafe.com.

Simulations

A simulation is a structured activity in which participants must confront problems and work to find solutions. Simulations are usually built around a realistic narrative that challenges participants to respond to changing circumstances or new information. The best are interactive and engaging and can be adapted to address multiple issues of the sort that arise in most organizations.

Simulations are most commonly employed as training tools, but some can be used to great effect to help participants recognize patterns that characterize their workplace interactions. In addition, they can help participants gain specific insights or skills they need to achieve their goals for the retreat. Be aware, however, that most simulations take several hours to run and debrief, so you will



Barry Oshry's perspectives on organizations are outlined in *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life* (1996) and *Leading Systems: Lessons from The Power Lab* (1999), books that come out of his experience leading an intense six-day residential program called The Power Lab. We highly recommend Power & Systems' certification program, which is a prerequisite for leading an Organization Workshop. For more information on the Organization Workshop, go to www.powerand systems.com.



For more information about EdgeWork go to www.ccl.org.

want to use them only in retreats that last longer than a day. And some can come across as “games,” which participants may resent “playing.”

A number of companies produce off-the-shelf simulations that can provide a framework around which to build an offsite retreat. One of our favorites is the Organization Workshop: Creating Partnership[®], developed by Barry Oshry, cofounder of Power & Systems. The Organization Workshop takes a minimum of half a day to facilitate and debrief but can establish an extremely useful framework for addressing communications, cooperation, and teamwork issues in an experiential way. We are certified to present this workshop and have found it particularly useful as a part of retreats for organizations that are struggling with turf battles or lack of cooperation and coordination between departments.

This highly engaging simulation centers on an organization exercise in which participants are randomly selected to be top executives, middle managers, workers, or customers who must then interact in a rapidly changing, high-pressure environment. The simulation is interrupted at key points to provide participants with practical strategic frameworks that help them understand what they are experiencing and how they can apply what they have learned to what happens in their own organizations. Some of our clients have told us that they found this experience transformational.

The Center for Creative Leadership and Discovery Learning have co-created an excellent and highly flexible simulation called EdgeWork[®], which can be run in four to six hours. Participants start the simulation “day” with an in-basket of internal memos, newspaper articles, and reports but are quickly drawn into a breaking crisis. EdgeWork can help an organization examine its habitual ways of managing both its everyday work and the critical problems that it must address.

One interesting dimension of the EdgeWork scenario is that it explores not only internal issues but also the relationship between two companies, one a manufacturer of a high-tech product and the other a service company that uses the manufactured product. When used by an organization engaged in strategic alliances, EdgeWork can draw attention to how these critical relationships work.

Another often-used simulation for fostering teamwork and rethinking processes is Paper Planes, Inc.[®] Participants work together to manufacture paper planes; as the simulation runs, people observe the impact of how they choose to organize their work and cooperate with each other.

And Pfeiffer (our publisher) offers several one- and two-hour survival simulations in which groups must make individual and joint choices about items they will need to survive in dramatic situations such as being stranded in the Himalayas or the Amazon or lost at sea. These simulations emphasize the synergy obtained through joint effort. In addition, you can use these simulations to help groups explore organization issues such as communication, leadership, power and authority, decision making, and conflict management.



You can find out more about Paper Planes, Inc., at www.discoverylearning.com.



You can find out more about these simulations at www.pfeiffer.com/Wiley/CDA (enter the keywords "survival simulation").

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a methodology that in the words of its primary originator, David L. Cooperrider (1995), uses "the best of the past and present" to "ignite the collective imagination of what might be."

Appreciative Inquiry flips traditional problem solving on its head. Rather than focusing on problems—identifying them, finding their causes, deciding on possible solutions, and taking action to overcome them—groups following the AI approach explore what they do well, envision possible scenarios for the future, discuss what they would like to see happen, and come up with innovative solutions that are grounded in current successes. Appreciative Inquiry has been combined very successfully with Future Search conferences when applied to large systems.

When skillfully facilitated, AI works particularly well in organizations that have undergone difficult transitions. We used it to stunning effect in a retreat for an organization that had gone through a poorly managed downsizing. For the first time, employees who were frightened, cynical, and burned out were able to talk about what they did best and what they aspired to for the future. This



If you are interested in learning more about AI, you may choose from several books and articles:

- *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: The First in a Series of AI Workbooks for Leaders of Change*, by David L. Cooperrider, Diana L. Whitney, and Jacqueline M. Stavros (2003), contains many AI tools as well as templates, session outlines, and exercises.
- *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*, by Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J. Mohr (2001), provides background on AI theory, case studies, and design help for AI sessions.
- *Lessons from the Field: Applying Appreciative Inquiry*, edited by Sue Annis Hammond and Cathy Royal (1998), offers background on AI, case studies from organizations around the world, models, interview guides, and practical applications, such as using AI for strategic planning.

was the beginning of a process that allowed a healthier organization to emerge, something that had eluded the executives in the postdownsizing problem-solving sessions they had convened.

There is no formal training required to lead an Appreciative Inquiry retreat, but when you're using it for the first time you are more likely to be successful if you work with a co-facilitator who is skilled in this methodology.

Outdoor Experiences

Many companies offer outdoor experience programs that combine a physical experience, such as white-water rafting, ropes courses, rock climbing, horseback riding, obstacle courses, hiking, and so on, with facilitation in teamwork, risk taking, and leadership.

For many groups and individuals, an outdoor adventure can be a memorable and exhilarating event. Even so, it may not lead to sustained change in the workplace. Moreover, a physically challenging company-mandated experience could prove embarrassing or very difficult for some participants and actually be counterproductive. We believe in the value of conducting some retreat sessions outdoors to stimulate fresh thinking, but we prefer lower-key activities that are focused on real workplace issues, such as engaging in a creative thinking exercise while taking a stroll in a natural setting. In any case, any outdoor program should be selected carefully, keeping in mind the physical abilities of all who will



Feeding the Zircon Gorilla and Other Team Building Activities, by Sam Sikes (1995), contains several outdoor activities that can be enjoyed by people of all physical abilities.

be there and verifying that the facility you work with is experienced, licensed, bonded, and well insured.

Work-Out

Work-Out sessions, which were developed by Jack Welch when he was CEO of General Electric in the 1980s, provide a mechanism to involve management and employees in open dialogue about an organization's strategies. The aim of a Work-Out is to improve processes by eliminating bureaucracy and non-value-added work.

Typically, a Work-Out is a structured two- or three-day process for multilevel, cross-functional teams of twenty to fifty people. The teams participate in a progressive series of large group and breakout discussions.

One premise of Work-Out, as described in *The GE Way Fieldbook* (Slater, 2000), is that the teams will get quick approval from decision makers about the recommendations they offer. At the end the teams meet with top managers to report their conclusions.

Work-Out is a rigorous methodology for changing an organization's work processes. It is not typically used for a single retreat but may form the framework for a series of sessions. General Electric uses academics and others trained in its system as facilitators. If you are interested in using Work-Out, we recommend that you partner with another facilitator who is experienced in this process.

The Pitfalls of Fixed-Format Retreats

You aren't likely to buy a sweater that doesn't fit just because you like the color or because someone you know has one just like it. As useful as fixed-format methodologies can be under the right conditions, we can't urge you strongly enough not to use one unless you are confident that it's the best way to address your organization's particular concerns. Here's an example of how a fixed-format retreat can go wrong.

A consultant we know, we'll call him Steve, signed a contract to lead a fixed-format retreat for a company that had just undergone a radical downsizing. The client told Steve that the retreat would be a morale builder for the staff, and Steve took the client at his word.

About two hours into the retreat a participant stood up and confronted Steve: “What the hell does this have to do with our circumstances? I’ve got twice as much work as I used to have. I don’t see how any of what we’re doing here is going to make it easier for me to do my job tomorrow.”

If the format had been flexible rather than fixed, Steve might have been able to stop the action at that point and acknowledge that person’s concerns. He could then have facilitated a candid discussion about what had changed in the company since the downsizing and how the group members might be able to work together to relieve some of the pressure they were experiencing in its wake.

Instead, Steve was trapped in the fixed agenda he had agreed to with the client. He didn’t have much information about the company or the option of responding in the moment to what had come up. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t really know anything about your circumstances. This is the retreat I was hired to lead.” Of course he lost the respect of the group, and the retreat just deepened employee cynicism.

To avoid such a disaster at the retreats that you lead, we encourage you to negotiate with your client for the flexibility to custom design a retreat that is tailored to fit her organization’s circumstances and to alter it in the moment if necessary to accomplish your client’s goals.