

	Phone: 865-692-0716 Fax: 865-692-0718	Web: <a href="http://www.scoreknox.org">www.scoreknox.org</a> Email: <a href="mailto:counseling@scoreknox.org">counseling@scoreknox.org</a>	Greater Knoxville SCORE Suite 450 412 N. Cedar Bluff Road Knoxville TN 37923
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## The Need for Board Retreats

It has been suggested that board retreats may be the best tool for nonprofit organizations that are experiencing problems. Here is a sampling of information we've found about board retreats.

*From a document by Ada Demb, Vice Provost for International Affairs and Associate Professor in Educational Policy and Leadership at Ohio State University.*

A retreat is a rare opportunity for the board to work at its *game* and to achieve a new standard of performance and satisfaction. Though the purposes for retreats vary, the main point is to use this opportunity to accomplish something that can't be done through routine meetings.

Successful retreats -- those that generate meaningful discussion and practical action agendas -- are carefully choreographed, with specific attention to these five elements:

1. Clear Goals, Leading to Practical and Specific Outcomes
2. Focused Agenda: The hours of a retreat will be put to best use if preparation has been done ahead of time to identify points that are uppermost in people's minds.
3. Comfortable Pace, Forward Movement: Either the chairman, the group itself, or a facilitator should monitor topics and ensure that comments are rounded out and that closure is achieved. Proper pacing involves leaving time for plenty of discussion, then moving on with a topic before it becomes tiresome.
3. Frank, Courteous Atmosphere: Frank and informal exchange is the main reason for a retreat. Board meetings are often too short and formal for the give-and-take necessary to examine all sides of an issue. The retreat offers time to discuss, disagree, then productively resolve the disagreement and define the next steps. The opportunity for open discussion allows board members to gain a fuller sense of the experience and style of their colleagues, and to develop their own style as a working group.
4. Setting That Enables Informal Contact: Coffee breaks, meals, a chat in front of a fireplace, and walking outdoors between sessions all provide the shirt-sleeved environment in which people can get to know each other and learn more about what they can contribute and what they might like to get out of the experience. Personal satisfaction is one important reason most directors agree to the responsibility of serving on a board. The board retreat is one setting in which some personal satisfactions are best achieved.

### Reviewing Board Performance

One use for a board retreat is to review board performance. The goal for this type of retreat is to better understand how the board can "add value" to the organization. Management and the board are partners in governing and managing the organization; the board needs to see where its contribution can create competitive advantage, leading to maximum performance for the team.

Here are some of the items that might be considered in reviewing board performance:

- S Companies and boards today are under increasing pressure for performance accountability. Gaining a clear and shared view of to whom the organization should be (or is) accountable is the first task. Which stakeholders take priority, and which interests must be taken into account?
- S Achieving success in the marketplace demands focus. The second task of the board review is selecting from the strategic matters facing the organization in the next three to five years those the board should be substantially involved in. Board involvement is essential when either 1) the issue is of fundamental importance to the definition of the organization, or 2) the board could contribute importantly to developing the strategy in that area. Ultimately, board performance depends upon whether board activity has been structured to support intelligent involvement in these strategic matters.
- S Who's responsible -- the board or management? This question explores the balance of responsibility, authority, and control between the board and management relative to the development and monitoring of organization strategy, CEO and top-management succession, and board member selection. Adjusting the balance, and recognizing the circumstances when it changes and evolves, are tasks for directors.
- S How does the board achieve judgment that is both critical (based on knowledge) and independent? This question goes beyond the obvious to consider the subtle aspects of judgment that directors bring to the table: knowledge of the area of social concern, broader perspectives from other areas or social trends, commitment to the organization and its values, and/or freedom from any vested interest in the organization in its present configuration. The quality of the board's judgment depends on the mix of these ingredients.
- S How to create a working style for the board that captures both the healthy skepticism of a collection of experts and the trust of a team, without becoming a cozy club? The chairman or CEO can set a tone, but there are other factors that support or undermine a productive working style. Directors need to consider communication patterns, the frequency of meetings, how directors join and leave the board, and whether board members share the same view of the board's mission. Defining a common mission and posture -- how active or reactive the board should be -- are key elements.

*From a document written by Burt Nanus, Professor Emeritus of Management at the University of Southern California*

Few good things in human affairs "just happen." In most cases, things happen only when people dream of a better tomorrow, decide they truly want to make it happen, and then act to turn their dreams into reality. That's what vision is all about. With increasing frequency, leaders are taking their staffs on vision retreats to make vision development a group process.

### **What Is a Vision Retreat?**

A **vision** is a realistic, credible, attractive future for an organization. It is a statement of intentions that defines a destination or future state of affairs that an individual or group finds particularly desirable. The right vision is an idea so powerful that it literally jump-starts the future by calling forth the energies, talents, and resources to make things happen.

A **visionary leader** is one who has the ability to formulate a compelling vision for the future of his or her organization, gain commitment to it, and translate that vision into reality by making the necessary organizational changes. Though some leaders (Walt Disney, Bill Gates, Ted Turner) have been able to do this singlehandedly, experience has shown that involving others in the visioning process at a meeting or "vision retreat" can realize even greater advantages.

A **vision retreat** is a meeting of a carefully chosen group of individuals engaged in a structured series of exercises designed to identify and assess vision alternatives for an organization. The group typically includes executives and staff professionals, and may involve trusted outsiders as well. The organization's leader is almost always fully engaged in the process, and is the primary user of the group's conclusions.

## **Vision and Strategy**

Though many leaders already take their key executives on retreats to develop annual plans or long-range strategies, these meetings rarely yield bold new ideas. People have a natural tendency to want to continue to do what they know best, especially if it worked well for them in the past. They're perfectly content to project past trends and create a "strategy" that merely assures more of the same.

A vision retreat can go a long way toward breaking the "business as usual" mindset by revealing new possibilities and opportunities. Discussion revolves around the fundamental nature and future prospects of the organization, instead of personally sensitive issues such as resource allocation or performance evaluations. This allows participants to be bold and creative without feeling that they are threatening their current operations.

Vision is a precondition for strategic planning. Just having a mission isn't enough, since mission statements are usually general statements of purpose offering little guidance for strategy. Without a vision, strategies may end up either projecting the status quo or being purely reactive, jumping here and there in response to random opportunities when they arise. With a vision, strategies can become deliberate and pro-active, allowing the organization to create its own opportunities and opening real possibilities for innovation and change.

Since a vision is inherently future-oriented, the strategies that derive from it will also tend to be farsighted. Since a vision often points the way toward the renewal or transformation of an organization, the strategies are likely to be innovative. And since a vision refers to the entire organization rather than its parts, the resulting strategies are likely to be interrelated and synergistic. That's why strategies should be: farsighted, innovative, and synergistic.

## **Why Use a Group Process?**

There are several good reasons for involving others in the search for a new vision:

-A group approach ensures that the resulting vision incorporates a broad range of viewpoints and expertise. The combined knowledge, judgment, and imagination of a group reduces the likelihood that significant factors or trends will be overlooked in the search for a new vision.

-A participatory process allows the ideas of individuals to be tested, argued, amplified, and refined by the arguments of others. Comments by one individual in the group will often stimulate added insights in others, bringing many perspectives to bear on the problem. Thus, the quality of the resulting vision is likely to be much improved, as these different perspectives can illuminate important aspects of vision alternatives that might escape the attention of a single observer.

- S Involving executives in the search for a shared vision makes it easier to gain commitment to the vision. It also facilitates subsequent strategy formation and decision making that, after all, may have to be implemented by some of the very same people. At best, such an exercise ends with a shared commitment to, and enthusiasm for, the new vision as well as a strategic agenda in which all the participants can claim pride of ownership.
- S There are team-building benefits when managers share their values and dreams. The retreat draws the executive team closer in their attitudes and beliefs, and fosters mutual respect and trust. A well-run exercise often leaves participants with a real sense of accomplishment, since they will have contributed in a significant way to the future of the enterprise.
- S The search for a shared vision often broadens everyone's understanding of the enterprise and the challenges and opportunities that are likely to face it in the future. This awareness may have benefits for the organization far beyond the exercise itself, as the participants use these new insights in their own decisions and actions.
- S Dealing with alternative future assumptions - an important aspect of such retreats - is a creative, mind-stretching exercise that helps to break with prevailing pressures for "business as usual."

### **Facilitating a Vision Retreat**

The facilitator, or person selected to organize and run a vision retreat, is often the key to its success. The ideal facilitator is a staff person or outside consultant with considerable experience and demonstrated competence in conducting management seminars, workshops, or decision-making committees. Such a person also must understand the issues of strategy, leadership, and vision that are at the heart of this type of exercise.

There are many possible ways to conduct a vision retreat, and each must be tailored to the purpose, organization, and time availability of the participants. One model that is especially useful is this five-phase approach:

- Phase 1: Preparation. Establish purpose, goals, and budget for the retreat, make arrangements for the meeting site, select and invite participants, and ask them to fill out preparatory forms.
- Phase 2: Initial meeting. Participants meet for about two days to discuss the Vision Audit (issues related to the character of the organization and its current mission and strategy), the Vision Scope (issues related to stakeholders, threats and opportunities, and the desired characteristics of a new vision), and the Vision Context (issues related to the organization's future economic, technological, social, and other environments).
- Phase 3: Analysis and report cycle. Facilitator summarizes the results of the first meeting, prepares three scenarios of the future based upon those deliberations, and gives participants a few weeks to reflect on the dialogue and prepare candidate vision statements.
- Phase 4: Final meeting. Group reconvenes for a day to discuss and evaluate vision alternatives, select one, and explore its strategic implications.
- Phase 5: Post-retreat activities. Conclusions of the retreat are summarized and communicated to the rest of the organization, strategies and actions are developed for implementing the vision, and a monitoring and evaluation process is put in place.

Variations of this process are possible if three full days are not available for participants to convene.

## Shaping the Future of an Organization

A vision retreat is most commonly used as the beginning phase for an annual strategic-planning process. Indeed, a new vision is virtually indispensable when there is a need to significantly transform or revitalize an organization to increase the likelihood of its future success. Vision retreats are also used simply to examine, revise, or update an existing vision statement or to validate and gain support for one prior to strategic planning.

However, a vision retreat can also be used for other purposes. It can be incorporated in a management-development program or a leadership seminar to sensitize managers to emerging issues, help them think about the future, and enhance their creativity or sense of risk taking. It can be used for team building to enhance mutual understanding, synergy, or teamwork in a group. It has also been used by newly appointed leaders to help them understand possible future directions for their organizations.

Finally, a vision retreat is an ideal process for futurists working in organizations to help their colleagues assess the significance of future trends and developments for their organizations. A well-articulated vision is the logical bridge between futures studies and the organizational actions needed to position an organization for the future. In this sense, vision retreats may provide the key to making futures studies more valuable and more pervasive in tomorrow's organizations.

### From Recharging the Board by Janette M. Quinn

Boards of directors are the lifeblood of not-for-profit organizations. Most initially come together to rally behind the meeting of an urgent need. As true believers in the cause, they see that the only way to get something done is to do it themselves.

As the organization matures, however, the role of the board members changes. The hiring of staff professionalizes operations, taking day-to-day operations out of the hands of the board members. Unless their energies are carefully guided elsewhere, board members may begin to suffer from three common (and potentially fatal) afflictions: complacency, non-support, and burnout.

**Complacent** board members have "ho-hum" attitudes. They may be convinced that a strong staff, other board members, or a good track record will keep the organization afloat without much effort on their parts. Their approach to decisions is an arm's length one, and they seem to take little or no responsibility for outcomes. To them, just showing up at some meetings is commitment enough.

**Non-supportive** or non-giving board members have received the impression that it's not necessary to support the cause financially. "I give my time," is a common response to the suggestion to do so. Most often, this seed was planted in an interview conducted while this member was still a board candidate -- a representative of the staff or nominating committee probably underplayed the expectation that board members share wealth as well as wisdom to help meet organization objectives.

**Burned-out** members say, "I've done too much for too long. My family and job have taken back seats. Let someone else take over." Once enthusiastic board members become less so when they feel they're being taken for granted or when they see little effort to recruit new volunteers for leadership posts. "Burnout" is a common result of failing to adequately recognize volunteers or of calling upon the same few too often.

## **Potential Cure: A Board Retreat**

One technique for administering a shot of strategic adrenalin to a board is a retreat. Such a retreat may take a variety of forms, for example:

- An orientation for new and continuing members, incorporating an agency overview and highlighting committee and individual staff and volunteer roles as they relate to the organization's success.
- A strategic planning session revisiting the mission using a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis approach as a basis for setting or updating objectives and action plans.
- A case development session, in which the group brainstorms ways to attract donors.
- An educational workshop to orient, prepare and inspire the board for necessary fundraising activities.

The retreat agenda should be tailored to the needs of the group. For example, financial projections and service statistics may help create discomfort among the complacent. (Many board members have been revitalized by the sight of red flags on the horizon of their organization's dreams.) Education and testimonials concerning donor motivations may develop awareness among the non-givers, and cause them to reconsider their positions when they realize that the community will follow their example.

A discussion of organizational charts and practices illustrating disproportionate burdens of responsibility may appease the burned-out. The fundraising committees, in particular, should welcome an infusion of new recruits following a session that stresses philanthropy's importance and the success and recognition volunteers who participate in asking will enjoy. Once they see enthusiasm building for roles from which they're weary, the burned-out just may recharge their own batteries and forge ahead among good company.

## **Help Is Available**

Board retreats lend themselves to facilitation by professionals outside the organization. Why should an outsider be better able to see the needs and design plans to meet them? Because advisers to not-for-profits witness and remedy similar problems in many settings. Not only do consultants provide a departure from usual spokespersons, they also offer objectivity and experience.

Involving outsiders in the planning and implementation of a retreat helps assure that its focus is upon critical issues. This focus is difficult for insiders to maintain, given the natural tendency to preserve working relationships and historical practices. The relatively small investment in occasional professional help pays big dividends in revealing realities, fostering consensus, and building new alliances among those responsible for the organization's future.

The benefits of annually breaking routine to mobilize a board toward improved functioning cannot be overstated. A board retreat is certainly not a panacea for all leadership ailments, but it is a pro-active means of beginning to address them. By taking steps to challenge detrimental attitudes and poor habits, organizations position themselves to attract the meaningful levels of moral and financial support that bring stability and long-range survival.

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George Hannye