

Board Retreats: Necessary But Fun!

In this article we examine the benefits of board retreats, offer a sample retreat agenda, suggest a trustee "contract" of commitment, and the promotion of board member ethics.

Every functional board needs some type of annual or even semi-annual retreat to be able to operate most effectively. Board retreats can be used to build morale, establish mission, vision, value, strategy statements, and to plan for the year and develop direction. Of course, underlying these reasons is the opportunity to cement personal commitments from each board member to the mission of your institution.

Planning your retreat

Effective retreats are planned well in advance so that all members can commit to attend. We suggest that attendance at these events be required, and be listed in your trustee job descriptions. Trustees that miss the retreat will miss the whole next year!

The old adage that discussing politics and religion is taboo may not be so taboo anymore. Because so many boards are becoming so much more diverse, talking about these topics can help instill tolerance and understanding among all board members. Certainly, understanding another's perspective helps in the decision making process.

Get away from the office and choose a relaxing location. If time commitment is a problem for your trustees you obviously want to hold it fairly close; but not too close, since you don't want anyone leaving intermittently or early to check on problems at their office or home. Certainly your organization should pay the expenses for lodging and meals, so remember to allocate funds during your budgeting process.

Also, it is a good idea, prior to the board retreat to have trustees complete a self assessment worksheet to help them understand what is expected of them as trustees, and also to be used as a benchmark for their participation. Questions to ask in the assessment include:

1. How familiar are you with the mission, vision and values of XYZ organization?
2. Do you feel you have a good handle on your specific responsibilities as a trustee?
3. What skill sets do you bring to this board and this organization?

___ Investment

___ Budgeting/Finances

___ Legal expertise

- ____ Strategic planning
- ____ Fundraising: annual, major, and/or planned?
- ____ Special event planning and implementation
- ____ Other

4. Are you serving on a committee? Do you attend committee meetings? Do you complete tasks assigned during these meetings?
5. On what other committees would you wish to serve?
6. Do you offer financial support to XYZ organization? Are you willing to increase your annual support for the remainder of your term on the Board? In your opinion, what is the minimum suggested annual contribution for each trustee?
7. Have you executed a planned gift to benefit the organization?
8. Have you been identifying prospects for fundraising and organizational leadership?
9. What have been the most rewarding aspects of your service on the Board?
10. What can be done to improve upon your board member experience to-date?
11. What significant things have you learned as a trustee?
12. Are you willing to be more involved next year? In what particular ways?
13. Are staff members providing the information and assistance that you need to be an effective trustee?
14. Please feel free to comment on any and all aspects of XYZ organization. Your candid assessment will help us become even more responsive to our constituency.

We suggest using this questionnaire in an anonymous manner, and if you are retaining a professional facilitator for your retreat, having these mailed to the facilitator before the event so that assessments can be reviewed and used to help steer the retreat.

Additionally, you will often have several extremely motivated board members that are enthusiastic about improving their performance, in addition to what they will get from a board retreat. They can do this by attending outside seminars and workshops which highlight their roles and responsibilities. They then apply what they have learned to the board of your organization, and teach others. The cost for attendance at these functions is usually minimal, and

will be paid back to the organization many times. Trustees that are enlightened by other trustees are active, productive and happy!

Also, bringing in outside speakers for your board meetings may prove helpful. Expert fundraisers or outstanding trustees from other organizations can make an impact on your board. Inform and educate at every opportunity.

Who leads the retreat?

Many times the chairman of the board will try to lead the retreat, but this is not the most effective approach. No offense to the chairman! An outside, paid facilitator with fundraising expertise brings objectivity to the table. Also, an experienced facilitator will know when to share some ideas and when to raise issues that need to be raised. Most importantly an outside facilitator will be perceived to be fair and unbiased by all attendees - this is very important when the object is to build consensus for the next year.

Sample agenda

What do you talk about, for how long, and when? We recommend that you begin in the morning and request that trustees arrive the previous evening or day. This way everyone will be fresh and ready to go. Below is a sample agenda that can be adapted for use by any organization.

DAY 1

8:00am - 8:45am Breakfast

Ask attendees to share the following information: where they grew up, why they accepted an invitation to join the board, and what they hope to gain from attending this board retreat.

9:00am - 9:30am Historical perspective of the organization.

Board chairman and Executive Director briefly share perspective from where the organization has come.

9:30am - 10:30am Desired Outcomes

Facilitator solicits ideas from all on what they wish the organization to do and become within a certain time frame.

10:45am - Noon Current Realities

Facilitator documents existing programs, problems, etc.

Noon - 1:15pm Lunch

1:30pm - 3:30pm Strategies for making current realities into desired outcomes

Facilitator solicits ideas to achieve desired outcomes.

3:45pm - 4:30pm Develop action plan

Facilitator helps participants prioritize goals and strategies for achieving goals based upon available and anticipated resources

6:00pm - 7:30pm Dinner

No business discussed, but great opportunity for board members to share funny stories relating to their involvement with organization, or family etc.

Executive Director may wish to present everyone in attendance with some type of gift for their participation: golf shirt with monogram, etc.

7:30pm - 8:30pm Assign responsibilities

Facilitator ensures that all goals and strategies are assigned to committees and/or individuals, and that a timetable for implementation is developed, and agreed upon by all.

8:30pm Wrap-up

This agenda makes for a full day, but it is an effective means for having board members participate in the process of defining the wish list (desired outcomes), discussing current programming (current realities), identifying strategies for achieving the desired outcomes, devising the action plan and making assignments for implementation.

During the wrap-up, it will prove worthwhile to ask board members to sign a "contract" pledging to work with the organization to achieve the just devised goals, reach new heights, and serve its constituency better. A sample pledge is below:

I _____, am in recognition of the responsibility I have in serving on the Board of Trustees of _____, and I pledge to carry out these responsibilities to the best of my ability. I also pledge to:

- 1. Make a substantial financial commitment to the organization.**
- 2. help identify, cultivate and solicit prospects for gifts to the organization.**

- 3. Assist in the development of policies to be implemented by the executive director and his/her staff.**
- 4. Read and abide by the bylaws of the organization so that the mission is carried out most exemplary.**
- 5. Attend all board meetings, committee meetings to which I am assigned, strategic planning sessions, board retreats, and special events that serve to unite prospects and donors for the benefit of the organization.**
- 6. Come prepared for all meetings, having read all materials sent to me before the meetings.**
- 7. Be respectful of other opinions, and embrace different points of view that may indeed be of benefit to the organization.**
- 8. Serve in the best interest of our constituency and not seek this position for my own personal gain.**
- 9. Leave administration to the administrators.**
- 10. Respect and support all board decisions even if I am not in favor of the decision.**
- 11. Above all, operate in the most ethical of manners, and to uphold the policies of this organization and assure that all legal and tax-exempt regulations are followed.**

If I am unable to carry out the above listed pledges satisfactorily, I agree that it is in the best interest of _____ for me to resign my position on the board.

_____ **Signature**

Some organizations, in addition to having trustees sign a "contract"; will also ask them to sign a code of ethics document. It is so important that your board members understand that they must observe and meet high standards of conduct. A code of ethics will lend credibility to your mission in the eyes of your constituents, and hopefully make members remember why they were asked to serve in the first place. Below is a sample code of ethics.

As a trustee for XYZ organization, I promise:

- 1. to promote the interest of our constituents, and not assuage to special interest groups.**
- 2. To put the goals and mission of the organization at the forefront of all decisions.**

3. **To keep confidential information confidential.**
4. **To not use my service to secure personal gain.**
5. **To do my best to ensure that XYZ organization is more prosperous when I leave the board than when I joined.**

Run properly, board retreats are the most effective means of unleashing the power and expertise of trustees in the stable. Bring them along in the planning process, secure their commitments to implement strategies for achieving desired outcomes, and success will come to your organization.

What is the date of your next board retreat?

Source: Sinclair, Townes & Company

www.sinclairtownes.com