



Staff Retreats and Team Building: Keeping the Learning Alive

One of the greatest challenges faced by staff retreats and teambuilding initiatives is that a bulk of the learning and insights are left offsite. In most situations, everyone leaves the program full of energy, new ideas and things to do. Back at the office things often return to “normal”, all the great energy and ideas left back at the retreat or team building venue.

Retreats and teambuilding sessions can be powerful tools of change. With a few changes to your next retreat or teambuilding planning process, you can enhance the transfer of learning back to the workplace. Consider the following:

Prior to the Retreat – Create the Foundation for Success:

1. **Contract the Facilitator for ongoing or post-retreat work with the group or team.**

For organizations that are tired of the post-retreat “same old”, consider how the services of the facilitator can be used on an ongoing basis. An approach I like to use with several of my clients is to hold monthly or even bi-weekly calls with the staff team. We have a focused agenda (a mix of retreat follow up and other emerging issues) and keep to time.

Other ideas for ongoing or post retreat support from the facilitator could involve having the facilitator attend a post-retreat staff meeting, facilitate a half day follow up session for the team or having the facilitator to undertake some follow up assessment regarding retreat impact.

2. **Make the session regular and a priority** – A pitfall for organizations is that they do not make retreats and teambuilding initiatives regular. Retreats are often the last thing to get checked off on the annual organizational priority list, and can become the catchall for everything that doesn’t fit somewhere else.

To make the sessions regular and a priority, allocate budgets so that staff can be brought together at least once a year. Set a purpose, with one or two measurable goals. Be realistic with what can, and can’t be dealt with during the retreat process.

During the Program – Build Onto the Foundation of Success

3. **Bring in additional “virtual team” members** – With the rise of geographically dispersed or virtual teams, retreats and off site team building initiatives can provide an opportunity for remote or virtual workers to connect physically with their team members. The importance of this face-to-face time

should not be overlooked. After the program, keep “virtual team” members intimately involved with the process and discussions.

4. **Action Planning** – Ensure that each retreat or team building process has an action planning component. Action planning can be done at the individual and team levels. Staff should take back to the office a concrete action plan of next steps, timelines and resources needed to fulfill the goals identified during the offsite.
5. **Parking Lot:** For issues and topics that arise and cannot be covered during the retreat or team building program, create a parking lot for topics that need to be carried forward into other organizational structures (i.e. staff meetings, quarterly planning meetings etc). Assign follow-up responsibilities to a dedicated staff member.
6. **Create a post-retreat accountability team** – Creating a “post retreat” staff team can be useful to keep tabs on what action steps have been taken and what the pulse of the team is. This information should be fed back to the team regularly and red flags raised. The information could be fed back to the external facilitator who could come in and do focused work quarterly, rather than monthly.

A post retreat accountability team may also be responsible for ensuring that “parking lot” issues - those issues not central to the theme of the retreat and needing to be addressed at a later date - are actually brought forward into the work environment with appropriate management and staff.

After the Program– Bringing the Learning Home

7. **Schedule Time for Follow up:** What doesn’t get scheduled, doesn’t get done. Ensure that you block off time for the team members to follow up on the decisions, recommendations and outcomes from the retreat or team building program. Revisiting action plans should be built into regular staff processes, for example, team meetings, and individual development plans. In addition to time, senior management should ensure that the requisite resources and authority are allocated to have the follow up happen .
8. **Initiate a follow-up coaching program** – Retreat and teambuilding results can be enhanced by following up with a structured program either one-on-one coaching, team or group coaching to keep the learning alive. Coaching programs can support the sustainability of the initiative. Coaching sessions can be used to revisit key principles and ideas covered during the program as well as to check in how staff are integrating these into their everyday work processes.

Which of these ideas can you incorporate into your next planning process? Building in some of these components before, during and after the retreat or team building process will boost the transfer and sustainability of the learning.

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The "Biz" Toolkit Blog: <http://biztoolkit.blogspot.com>

Team Coaching: <http://www.groupcoachingessentials.com/pages/team-coaching>

Email: jennifer@potentialsrealized.com -

Toll Free: 1-866-217-1960

Jennifer J. Britton is the founder of Potentials Realized. Jennifer works with corporate clients and business owners to achieve the success and impact they desire in teamwork, business, balance and performance issues, through the provision of coaching, consulting and training services. She regularly facilitates team building sessions and retreats (virtual, on and offsite) with governmental, nonprofit and corporate clients. As a performance improvement specialist, she works with leading edge organizations across North America and the Caribbean to take their performance to extraordinary. She is a Certified Professional Co-Active Coach, a Certified Performance Technologist and a Certified Human Resource Professional. Jennifer provides team, group and executive coaching programs. Jennifer also consults on Human Resource, Team and Performance issues. Jennifer is known for her engaging, results-oriented, customized collaborations.

Visit Jennifer online at <http://www.potentialsrealized.com> and <http://www.groupcoachingessentials.com>