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ADVISORY

10 Tips for Firm Retreats

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Gary Adamson • May. 22, 2017



Another tax season is over and many CPA firms are turning their attention to scheduling their annual planning retreat. If you're not one of them then I encourage you to become one; planning retreats are a critical part of firm management and strategy. It is the process where your leadership group establishes the road map for the firm for the next year and beyond. You know the old saying "if you don't know where you're going, any old road will do".

As a former managing partner (MP) with a firm who religiously held an annual retreat, I can offer a few tips to you from experience that will help you get the most out of the process. You're investing a lot of time (= money) taking your top talent out of production, so make it worthwhile.

Here are my ten tips. Give them to your MP or firm administrator. It's a quick checklist to help you.

1. **Venue.** Hold the retreat outside your offices. Select a comfortable meeting facility far enough away from the office that it is not easy for people to "stop by" the office. Better yet, hold it out of town. This takes a little bit more planning but is worth it. We used to alternate between staying local and going to a resort location every other year.
2. **Mix in Some Fun.** You don't get the group together very often. Take advantage of the opportunity to do something as a group that's not business. It will help you get to know each other better and perhaps take the edge off of the retreat itself, particularly if you have some tough issues to discuss.
3. **Spouses?** This is a business meeting and a time to be with your business partners. That said, I'm a realist. Depending on your destination, if spouses are going to show up, try to make it before or after, not during.
4. **Duration.** One day or two? My experience is that it is tough for most firms to get it all done in one day, but on the other hand two full days can be exhausting for the group. Consider a day and a half or so, concluding early afternoon on day two. The opportunity to "sleep on it" can be good and the second morning conversation is often the most valuable of the retreat.
5. **Outside Facilitator (or Not).** I have a strong opinion here and not just because I do a lot of retreat facilitation. In the no – facilitator approach, your MP usually winds up leading the retreat because "someone has to do it". When you put your MP in that role, it creates a very different atmosphere and changes the dynamics of his or her participation. Most firms find that it is worth the investment to bring in the outside person.

6. **Survey.** Make sure that you survey your group and develop the agenda beforehand. It takes too much time to try to do it on site at the retreat. The survey is best done by the outside facilitator in a confidential manner, meaning that individual comments are not shared. Typically the facilitator and the MP will use the survey results and work together to develop the agenda.
7. **Strategic.** Remember that your annual planning retreat is a strategic meeting of the firm's leadership. It is about the future of the firm and where we're going – big picture things. It's not about billing rates or staff salary increases or things that are part of the day to day management of the firm.
8. **How deep do we go?** This is the question about whether we are flying at the 30,000 ft. view or do we get into the weeds? The answer should be somewhere in between. The purpose of the retreat is not to hash out detailed solutions to problems or questions. It is to develop the question or issue far enough to articulate agreement on a direction and an action plan to later deal with the details.
9. **Short List / Short Time Frame.** I strongly suggest that you keep your action plan coming out of the retreat to a relatively short list and that you focus on what you can get done in the next several months excluding busy season. Figure out what is really important and don't over-commit. Coming out with a laundry list and unreasonable expectations is setting you up to fail. And, we all know that implementation is where most of us drop the ball.
0. **Implementation.** Make sure that you spend some time at the retreat talking about how you will implement beyond putting a name and date beside each action item. How are you going to make sure that the ball isn't dropped? You need an implementation action plan and it's really up to your MP after the retreat to keep it alive.

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