Getting the Most Out of Partner Retreats

By Tim Bartz, Director, Upstream Academy

Each year, managing partners and executive committees spend considerable time scheduling and planning the firm's annual partner retreat. I believe that most firm leaders see this event as an important tool to connect partners and address important issues. I'm equally certain that few partners get excited about the prospect of spending two days in meetings where they do what they've always done before with the hope of getting different results than in the past.

While there's probably ample reason for partners to approach these annual events with a great deal of skepticism, there are certainly ways to help ensure the success of these meetings. Here are ten things you can do to make partner retreats some of the most valuable time your firm leaders spend together.

1. Define the Desired Outcomes
2. Set the Bar High
3. Get Out of Ruts
4. Require Some Skin in the Game
5. Hunt Down and Destroy the Elephants
6. Divide and Conquer
7. Coach Key Leaders Before the Meeting
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9. Expect Results
10. Tell the Story

Define the Desired Outcomes

One of the many reasons partners get frustrated with annual retreats is that no one clearly defines the desired results from these gatherings. Why? The retreat has become a habit and is no longer viewed as a process. Outlining the expected results is the job of the managing partner and/or executive committee. If you're going to take the collective resources of your top producers and marketers out of the field for a couple of days, doesn't it make sense to take several simple steps to help ensure something meaningful comes out of such an investment? In my experience, partners quickly lose faith in meetings where the purpose and desired outcomes aren't clearly defined and no deliverable is produced from the time spent together.

Certainly one expectation of every partner retreat should be to strengthen relationships between the individuals who make up this powerful group. Even if everyone is located in the same office, there is often little time in the life of busy professionals to connect with their

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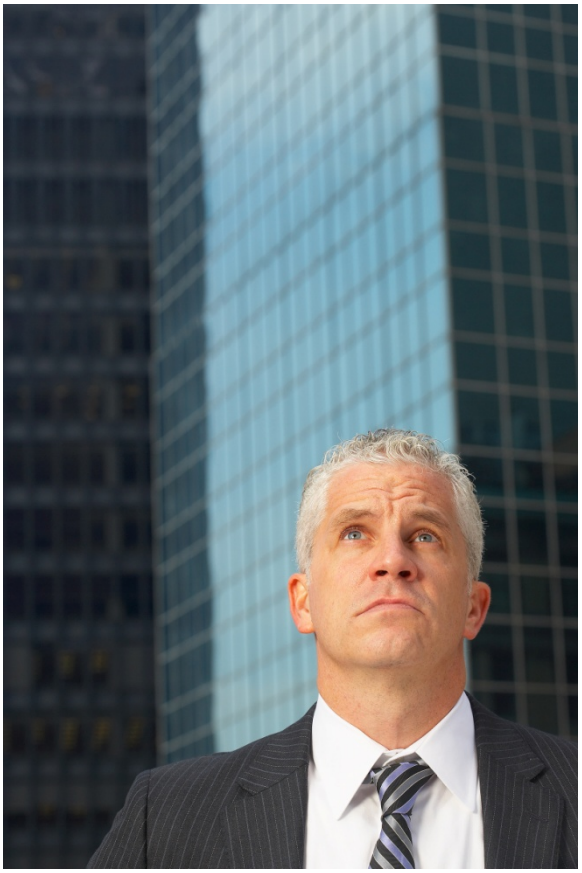
partners. Relationship building can only happen if you define this as a desired result and make sure there's time devoted to it in the schedule. As the CEO of a multi-office CPA firm, I found that our best solution for achieving this objective was to select a location that made it easy for people to gather outside the retreat sessions and enjoy one another's company. We found a lodge setting to be much more conducive to partners spending time together than a hotel setting. In addition to choosing the right setting, we deliberately scheduled recreation time in the agenda and offered a broad range of activities to encourage relationship building via group activities. While I could never legislate what happened, I was certainly able to set the stage for achieving this important objective.

> *I'm convinced that partner retreats constitute some of the most valuable time we spend as a firm.*

In addition to relationship building, there are many important items that should be addressed at a retreat. Define what you want to accomplish and limit the agenda so you don't get pulled in too many directions. Perhaps there are some key processes that need attention and the collaborative efforts of the group. Maybe you need to discuss important ownership issues such as succession planning or



changes in governance documents. Perhaps it's working on the firm's strategic plan (either planning or implementation). Any or all of these are great reasons to get together, but the first step in a successful retreat is to define exactly what you want to accomplish.

Set the Bar High

If you want important things to happen, then every aspect of the retreat must be planned as if you had invited your very best clients and prospects to attend and you were trying to impress them. Nothing should be left to chance. It takes time and effort and money, but I've found that participants bring a much

different attitude into meetings that are well planned and contain some WOWs.

I remember when we first caught on to this idea. It came from the leaders of our administrative functions—HR, IT, Marketing and Accounting. Their collective objective was to serve the firm as they would serve an A-level client. This leadership group planned gifts for all retreat participants, created outstanding personalized materials binders (in color of course), planned a greeting committee to

welcome each leader to the meeting, and helped everyone get registered and settled in their rooms. What a difference such an approach makes! It's tough to act like a slob when someone is treating you like a king. Once we started doing this, it became a tradition and everyone expects nothing less.

Whatever you choose to do, make sure it's done in a way that shows careful planning and that you're ready for the meeting. Deliver a lot to those attending and expect a lot from their participation.

Get Out of Ruts

There's nothing like change to jar people out of complacency. Firms often meet in the same location each year and use the same agenda. Everyone is bored because tradition has become old hat. The solution? Don't be afraid to try a new location. Define the setting you want and make reservations well in advance. If you've found a great location, keep it—but do something different with the schedule each year. Again, this is the responsibility of those planning the meeting and it's important.

When you do something different every year, make sure the change is significant. Earlier, I mentioned that our admin leaders planned WOWs for our partners when they came to the retreat every year. It became challenging for them to figure out what to do differently each year. However, when you've got great effort like that happening, the anticipation of participants is probably 90% of the success!

Require Some Skin in the Game

Too many participants come to partner meetings with empty hands and empty brains. They've done nothing to prepare for the meeting, so they arrive with low expectations and little to contribute. Although this may sometimes be the fault of participants, more often it's the fault of firm leaders for omitting

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this from the planning. Where little is required, little is gained.

I'm always amazed at how little many partners read about leadership and business issues. They're consumed by their technical reading, and as a result they're less valuable to their clients because all they've become is "code heads."

There are so many good books available that require only a few hours of reading time to teach excellent points about such things as

- Client service: try *Getting Naked* by Patrick Lencioni
- What it takes to be a good leader: try *The Servant* by James C. Hunter
- What it takes to be successful as a professional service firm: try *True Professionalism* by David Maister

The list of possibilities is extensive. If you'd like a great reading list, go to our website (upstreamacademy.com) for some ideas. Ask your partners to read a book or selected articles and then take some time at the meeting to discuss how the concepts in the reading can and should impact your firm.

Another important issue is meeting packets. Provide them well in advance and require participants to read the materials and come to the retreat prepared for discussion.

One of the most effective things I discovered to produce great partner retreats was to make these meetings optional but require certain behaviors from those who chose to come. The requirements included the following:

- Come and "be present" for all parts of the meeting
- Engage in the dialog of the group and offer input on the issues
- Only use cell phones and the Internet during breaks
- Participate in both the business meetings and the social activities

You can make your own list, but be sure some preparation is required to come to the meeting. Do this, and you'll have a much more engaged group of participants.

Hunt Down and Destroy the Elephants

One of the things that keeps partner retreats from being effective is the presence of "hidden elephants" in the firm and/or ownership group. When these elephants exist and nothing is done

about them, the confidence and trust of the group is easily lost. Leadership has no integrity where these elephants exist.

So what do I mean by hidden elephants? Here are some common examples:

- An office or department continually underperforms yet no attempt is made to bring about substantive change.
- A department leader is clearly not the right person for the job but remains in his/her position.
- There are underperforming partners in the group but nothing is done to change their behaviors.
- There are greedy partners within the group who think only in terms of "What's in it for me?" instead of "What's in the firm's best interest?"
- A partner continually violates the firm's core values but is never held accountable.
- Factions exist within the partner group regarding the direction of the firm.
- There is significant conflict between departments, offices, or regions of the firm but no attempt at a healing process.
- The partner compensation system is broken and nothing is being done to fix it.
- Administrative leaders are not producing the expected results for their positions.
- A key player is retiring and there is no replacement for that individual.
- The firm's deferred compensation system is too rich and younger partners are concerned about how they will carry the load.

Make sure your group has time to search for and eliminate these elephants. A good facilitator can make this happen without destroying the firm. In fact, when the elephants are gone everything can grow faster and become healthier because the resources of the firm aren't consumed in dealing with the elephant issues.

If you haven't done this in a while, the only thing on your retreat agenda might be to kill the elephants.

Divide and Conquer

I've found that it's difficult to get everyone to participate in meetings at a more or less equal level, probably because some people are just quieter and more deliberate in their speech. This seems to be especially true when the size of the group exceeds 10 people. While reserve can be an excellent trait in some ways, we stress to our owners that once they become

shareholders they lose the right to remain silent.

As a facilitator, I actively watch to ensure everyone is talking. One of the best ways to engage everyone is to use small groups of 4 or 5 people to discuss certain issues. It's tough to hide in a small group. Small groups also allow partners to address more meaningful issues and develop specific action plans to implement changes. All of the partners can weigh in at some point, but the best work occurs in small groups. These groups are especially effective when people are free to choose their issue.

Coach Key Leaders Before the Meeting

Another effective way to ensure you accomplish the goals of your retreat is to prepare discussion leaders in advance of the meeting by coaching them on the issues and defining what you need from their groups. When this is done beforehand, people aren't caught off-guard. You also don't have to listen to, "Well, I guess I got stuck reporting for the group." Preparing group leaders ahead of time to engage all participants will help ensure you get the best input from everyone.

8 > 4

If you've been involved in any Upstream programs, you've probably heard the saying, "It's better to do fewer things and do them at a level 8 than it is to work on a lot of things and do them at a level 4." Firm leaders and retreat facilitators need to understand this principle. Many times when firms feel defeated it's because they've bitten off too much. They're simply trying to do too many things.

I speak from personal experience because that was my way of doing things for many years. I called myself the "doom loop king" (taken from the Jim Collins book *Good to Great*): a lot of good intentions followed by lack of results, and then on to something else. What I finally discovered was that regardless of the size of the organization, you can only expect to accomplish two or three important goals in any given year. There are simply not enough resources to do more than that and still serve clients, develop people, and make a profit.

Do the most important things first, but don't try to capture Rome in a day.

Expect Results

Your objective should be to leave the partner retreat with a fully developed plan to get from Point A to Point B. If this doesn't happen, it's nearly impossible to get all of the partners together again to finish the plan once everyone has returned to the office. Even if the plan is fully developed at the retreat, implementation will occur over a period of several months. The managing partner must clearly lay out expectations for returning and reporting as time

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progresses. Self-accountability must be taught and expected. It must be clear to everyone that a lackluster implementation effort will not be tolerated, especially when so many resources went into discussion and planning.

One tool I've found especially helpful for ensuring successful implementation is getting a good administrative professional involved in the process and giving that person the authority and responsibility to keep the project moving. If implementation begins to lag, this person is responsible for meeting with the managing partner to develop a corrective course of action.

Tell the Story

One of the best tools for keeping projects moving is to communicate timetables to all of the partners and leaders, and perhaps even the entire staff. Once everyone is aware of the implementation plan, you need to find an effective way to communicate progress.

A monthly update works well. We use our firm-wide newsletter, staff meetings and special email messages to communicate our progress. There's nothing like a little peer pressure and professional competitiveness to keep things moving at a high level.

Report failures with as much enthusiasm as successes. It makes you real and builds integrity as you readily admit to your failings and plan what needs to happen next. It also communicates that failure is not the end of the world, especially if everyone gave it their best shot.

I'm convinced that partner retreats constitute some of the most valuable time we spend as a firm. It's that Quadrant II time Stephen Covey talks about, the time when we're working on things that are very important but not necessarily urgent. If you follow the process outlined above, every partner retreat can be a great energy boost to your organization.

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