

Getting the Most Out of Partner Retreats

Upstream Academy

Each year, managing partners and executive committees spend considerable time scheduling and planning the firm's annual partner retreat.

Most firm leaders see this event as an important tool to connect partners and address key issues. Few partners get excited about the prospect of spending two days in meetings. Too often they anticipate that they'll do what they've always done before with little hope of getting different results than in the past.

Partners likely have ample reason to approach these annual events with skepticism, but by taking a proactive, planned approach you can ensure a more successful meeting. To make partner retreats some of the most valuable time your firm leaders spend together, follow these principles:

1. Define the Desired Outcomes
2. Set the Bar High
3. Get Out of Ruts
4. Require Commitment
5. Hunt Down and Destroy the Elephants
6. Divide and Conquer
7. Coach Key Leaders Before the Meeting
8. Remember 8 > 4
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. 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 use the collective resources of your top producers and marketers for days, doesn't it make sense to 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, the work pressures and increasingly virtual business environment often leaves little time for your partners to connect.

Relationship building can only happen if you define this as a desired result and devote time in the schedule. One solution for achieving this objective is to select a location that makes it easy for people to gather outside the retreat sessions and enjoy one another's company. Getting out of the office to an off-site location can help partners set aside some day-to-day pressures. Consider scheduling recreation time in the agenda and offering a broad range of activities to encourage relationship building via group activities. While legislating leisure is difficult, you can make it easier for your firm leaders to connect.

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spend as a firm.*

In addition to relationship building, define what else you want to accomplish and limit the agenda so you don't get pulled in too many directions. Items to consider may include:

- determining key processes that need attention and the collaborative efforts of the group
- discussing important ownership issues such as succession planning or changes in governance documents
- 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 participants will bring a much different attitude into meetings that are well planned and contain some WOWs.

It's tough to act like a slob when someone is treating you like a king. Make sure your retreat shows careful planning and that you're ready for serious discussions. Deliver a lot to those attending and expect a lot from their participation.

Get Out of Ruts

Change can 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.

When you do something different every year, make sure the change is significant and makes an impact.

Require Commitment

Too many participants come to partner meetings with empty hands and empty brains. Since they've done nothing to prepare for the meeting, they arrive with low expectations and little to contribute. To get the most from your meeting, don't omit making assignments from your planning. Where little is required, little is gained.

Despite being responsible for leading and running the firm, many partners spend surprisingly little time reading about leadership and business issues. They're consumed by technical reading, and as a result are less valuable to clients because they are too focused on the technical.

Many good books 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 requiring partners to come with knowledge of the issues at hand. Provide hard copies or links well in advance and require participants to read/listen to/watch materials and come to the retreat prepared for discussion.

Consider making 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 under-performs 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.

- Under-performing partners drag down the group but nothing is done to change their behaviors.
- Some greedy partners within the group 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 within the partner group continually fight to gain control of the direction of the firm.
- Significant conflict exists between departments, offices, or regions of the firm with no attempt at a healing process or building unity.
- 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 no replacement for that individual has been identified.
- 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, it's important to stress to 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.

Remember 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.

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 or executive committee must clearly lay out expectations for returning and reporting as time 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.

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.

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 you'll spend as a firm. It's that Quadrant II time Stephen Covey talks about, the time when you'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.

For more information, please contact us at info@upstreamacademy.com