

Training and Team Building: Board Retreats Can Be the Answer by Del Suggs

You've got veteran board members who know everything (just ask them!); you've got new board members who are green as a grasshopper; and, you've got a few board members who've been around just long enough to figure out they need a little guidance. They all need to learn to work together as a team, while at the same time they need to learn to perform their duties and responsibilities on the student activities board. Unfortunately, there is no time at the weekly meetings for any kind of training or bonding. What do you do? Sounds like it's time for a Board Retreat!

Board retreats can be the perfect way to get your team in the game. You can teach new skills, create a sense of camaraderie, and take care of some serious planning. A board retreat can be the solution to a number of problems, and it doesn't have to be done at the beginning of the year.

A retreat held with the new board over the Summer or just before Fall classes begin can be a terrific time to schedule the first semester's programs. But a retreat held in January will allow you to address the deficiencies you've noted during the Fall, and serve to reinvigorate your board. Still, a retreat at the end of the year lets you recap your successes and failures over the last year while they are still fresh in your mind, and beginning planning for next year's victories.

Begin with some advance planning and analysis. Do you have a board with obvious weaknesses-- such as poor promotion, homogeneous programs, or just lack of

motivation? Do you have some students who just don't get along, a "personality conflict" that flares up whenever they try to work together? Do you have some board members who don't follow through and complete their duties, leaving you or other board members to carry the slack? All of these issues can be effectively addressed at a retreat. Make a list of your concerns, and present programs that will impart the skills your members need.

Next, look at your budget, and options. The ideal retreat is held far enough away to eliminate everyday distractions. So consider going off campus, if possible. Perhaps your school has a place such as a camp or a guest house, or maybe even a meeting facility you could use. Maybe you could borrow or rent a place from a supportive alumni. Look hard, and don't rent a space unless you absolutely have to, because you can spend that money on other projects.

If you can't get off campus, try to get as isolated as you can. It's difficult to do a retreat in the same student center the board members meet in every week. You need to find some place different. The College Board of Trustees meeting room might be reserved through the President's Office, and it will certainly be a change from your office.

Consider your time frame and schedule. Don't be locked into false conceptions. Some wonderful retreats have begun on Friday afternoon and ended on Sunday night. Still others all occurred in one day. It's a matter of knowing what you need to accomplish, and finding a way to do the job.

If you have a brand new board, then you may need several days to teach them the skills they need. If you have a board with mixed experience, then some skills can be learned from other board members through an informal apprentice program. It's all up to you.

Retreats generally begin with some team building. You've got to allow opportunities for the board to get to know each other and to bond. That means icebreakers, games, athletic events, and more to facilitate a team interaction. Ropes courses are popular, as are other semi-skilled athletic outings such as canoeing and hiking. But don't plan anything too strenuous or dangerous. You don't want your board too exhausted to participate in the training programs, and you certainly don't want any injuries!

A weekend retreat might have team building in the mornings, and training in the afternoon and evenings. Of course, you'll want to end each day with some fun. Whether it's smores around the bonfire, or a karioke dance party, let the board have some laughs. It's all for the sake of building camaraderie.

You've also got to do some honest-to-goodness teaching. One basic reason for a retreat is to educate your members about programming. There is much to learn, and there will be many different starting points. So let's begin by taking a quick survey of your board and their strengths. Have they been having problems in specific areas, like contracts or promotion? Are you worried about their lack of professional conduct, like making decisions

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promptly, returning emails and calls, and more? If you see some obvious shortcomings, then address these at the retreat.

Don't miss the opportunity to bring in an outside facilitator to help with your retreat. I frequently present sessions for program board retreats and workshops. One thing you may already know: your students are more likely to believe something that someone else tells them-- even if it's the same thing you tell them. It's funny, but true.

There are lots of ways you can use outside experts. With some trainers, you just get out of the way and they do everything. Other professionals may just present in their area of expertise. I find that the most effective retreats are jointly facilitated by a "visiting scholar" and the adviser. You can utilize your skills and strengths, and bring in another trainer to emphasize the important topics. But you-- the advisor-- need to be involved. Team building isn't just for your board members. You are a vital part of the team, too. You ALL need to learn to work together.

Lift your board out of the doldrums with an effective retreat. Any time of the year, retreats are a useful tool for learning, planning, and creative programming.

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