
BOARD MEMBERS

DON'T MAKE A

ILLUSTRATION BY SIMON SHAW



"Hasty Retreat"

BY LEE DRAPER

Your foundation may be faced with issues that require an evaluation of its operations and activities. You might be seeking direction as a newly formed foundation or trying to determine how to deal with a significant growth in assets. You might be seeking renewed commitment to the foundation's mission after the retirement or death of the founder. Perhaps you're adjusting to changes in long-term leadership, turnover in board membership or staffing, or, as a family foundation, hope to include members of the next generation on the foundation board. All of these circumstances offer an important opportunity to step back from "business as usual" and develop new strategies for the future.

A board retreat is a powerful vehicle for helping foundation boards determine what they will do or how they will operate in the future.

Read on to learn more about the benefits of board retreats and how to plan and conduct effective ones.

Why a Retreat?

Why organize a retreat outside of the regular board meetings? Board retreats are useful for addressing

issues that can't be adequately discussed during a normal board meeting. Time constraints and the amount of regular business tend to limit a board's ability to achieve a broad perspective or tackle overarching topics. And the formal atmosphere of board meetings tends to stem the development of solutions.

Retreats, on the other hand, allow a board to gather in a new, neutral environment that is unrestricted by routines, traditional approaches or expected authority roles. There is more time for reflection and discussion, which is conducive to creative thinking and strategic decisionmaking.

A board retreat is also a good vehicle for an infusion of special resources (e.g., information, preliminary surveys, needs assessments, evaluation, outside experts). This extra effort and investment will help stimulate a shared understanding of issues and promote consensus.

The result: a sense of unity and mutual respect among board members. A good retreat becomes the launch pad for more effective teamwork in the coming year.

Organizing an effective board retreat involves

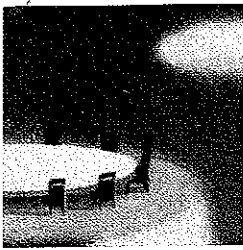
A family foundation board retreat—or any board retreat, for that matter—provides an opportunity to solve immediate problems and forge a common vision for the future. These ideas can help you to plan a retreat carefully.

- establishing clearly articulated and realistic objectives,
- adequate planning, and
- skilled facilitation that promotes effective communication and targeted decisionmaking.

Here's a look at each of these in turn.

Establishing Realistic Objectives

The first step in developing a board retreat is to identify the central issue to be addressed. A wide variety of topics lend themselves to a retreat format. Topics can relate to the foundation's mission, governance, program interests, long-range planning or effective communication.



Nearly Limitless Topics

The number of retreat topics is nearly limitless. Here are some ideas:

- Defining a new or revised mission, vision, and values for the foundation.
- Affirming the mission and originating values and developing a plan for applying them to current circumstances.
- Strategic planning
- Defining the roles and responsibilities of board members
- Developing a plan for recruiting a new generation of board members and officers.
- Improving communication
- Addressing challenges or problems that affect family foundation functioning.
- Developing program priorities or identifying objectives within established program areas.
- Focusing on one of the foundation's program areas and learning about the crucial issues, what is being done by other funders and potential roles the foundation can play in the future.
- Revising the proposal review process or training board members in how it is done
- Assessing the accomplishments and effect of the foundation

—L.D.

(See "Nearly Limitless Topics," left, for a description of common themes.)

Most important, though, is to choose a single theme. It's reasonable for the board to expect that one topic or—with difficulty—two topics of discussion can be addressed in a retreat. If two topics are of interest or need, the board should prioritize them and concentrate the majority of the retreat on the first priority. That way, you can be assured of achieving resolution and a game plan in the highest priority area.

For family foundations, it's worth noting that a retreat should focus on the foundation's needs and not on family issues per se. It's crucial to clearly separate foundation board roles and responsibilities from family roles and dynamics so that the retreat can lead to effective organization and operation of the family foundation for years to come.

Planning the Retreat

Good planning will avoid disappointments that result when board members have come to the retreat with different expectations, needs or objectives, or when they are not appropriately prepared.

Once you have chosen your retreat topic, take the following steps:

Determine the retreat date at least six to 12 months in advance. Plenty of notice allows board members to plan their schedules so that 100 percent attendance is achieved. Most important, this time will allow for adequate planning and preparation.

Recruit a small committee (of two or three members) to plan the retreat. These board members will guide the planning process, delegate tasks and oversee decisions. Involve key individuals who can bring a variety of perspectives, such as the donor, one of the newest or youngest members and the chief staff administrator. Fresh ideas and a complement of different views can help form creative and productive approaches to the retreat. Having a retreat planning committee will also ensure that valuable board meeting time will not be taken up discussing logistical details.

Select a facilitator (internal or external) that will guide the discussion at the retreat. The facilitator should also be involved in planning the retreat from the inception.

Define the goals and desired outcomes. You will get more from a retreat if you have a clear understanding about what needs to be accomplished. Clarity will help delineate a format for the retreat and avoid vague discussions with no apparent purpose.

Provide opportunities to get input from all board members to ensure that everyone feels included in the process. Written surveys or individual interviews are helpful in accomplishing this. Egalitarian and comprehensive participation encourages retreat investment by the full group. It also prevents the retreat from becoming the vehicle of one member or a minority of the board, often with a predetermined outcome.

Send retreat materials in advance to allow board members to prepare for the issues to be discussed with new information, resources or a broadened perspective. These materials should include a written agenda with the objectives and themes to be explored.

Determine a method of recording or documenting the results of the retreat so that the discussion and decisions can be summarized at the next board meeting. This enables the decisions to be formalized and used as the basis of foundation operation in the future.

The Retreat Facilitator

One of the keys to a successful board retreat is an effective facilitator. The retreat facilitator guides discussion, maintains the focus, directs the tone of the discussion and keeps aware of time limits. The facilitator does not add his or her opinions to the content of the discussion or influence the outcome. A good facilitator

- is impartial and objective,
- has experience working with groups of people,
- has experience with foundations, and
- is someone the board members feel they can trust.

He or she promotes opportunities for everyone's opinions to be expressed and respected. He or she establishes boundaries for the discussion so that the group focuses on its objectives. A facilitator also ensures that disagreements are channeled into finding common ground, compromise or some other resolution.

A facilitator can be chosen internally from among the board members. In this case, he or she must remove the hat of "board member" and adopt neutrality in all discussions. This means that his or her opinions or input are foregone in favor of performing the important function of guiding the group's deliberations. This is difficult because people with facilitation skills are often natural leaders in the group, and the board would lose the valuable voice and opinion of a key member at the retreat.

Most boards prefer to hire an outside facilitator. That way, they can benefit from full partici-

pation of all board members. In addition, because an outside facilitator should be recruited early, the board receives the consultant's broad experience and expertise from the onset of retreat planning (For help in locating facilitators, see "Looking for a Good Facilitator?," right.)

Once your foundation's retreat planning committee has identified some potential facilitators, ask them to submit materials with information about their qualifications and services. Ask for a cover letter indicating experience and approach, a resume or profile of their services and contact information for three references.

Upon reviewing the materials, the retreat planning committee should identify two or three potential facilitators to interview. From the interview, ask those candidates you feel might be a good fit with the board to submit a written proposal that outlines the scope of their services in planning and conducting the retreat, the time line and estimated fees. After a preliminary choice is made based on the proposals, it is very important to check references.

The cost of hiring a facilitator can vary tremendously. Some factors in determining the cost are the scope of the project, the topic of the retreat and the number of board members. Higher costs will also incur from a more comprehensive planning process involving input from individual board members, staff or others (e.g., interviewing and surveying), or a topic that requires more preparation and investigation (e.g., communication challenges).

But don't determine the facilitator on the bottom line of cost. Quality is essential, especially when it is the board's first retreat.

Logistics

Retreats are best when held in facilities that are different than those used for traditional board meetings. They should be neutral, comfortable and conducive to relaxed and creative thinking.

Usually retreats last one or two days. Optimally, they last for the majority of the day, leaving the evening free. Most people are fresher in the morning and it is helpful to tackle the more conceptual or challenging issues at this time.

Most foundation boards also find it beneficial to integrate opportunities before or after the retreat for simple socializing and relaxation, especially when members have traveled distances to attend. If a board business meeting has to be conducted, schedule it after the retreat. Board members will be more receptive to "thinking outside the box" before tackling regular business, and the formal board meeting will be

inspired by the outcomes of the retreat.

Maximizing Success

In addition to adequate planning, these guidelines will make a successful retreat:

First, it is important to establish ground rules that encourage brainstorming, full participation by all board members, mutual respect and cooperation. Ground rules will avoid scenarios such as the domination of the conversation by only a few people, getting locked into disagreements that divide the board or rehashing old problems without achieving resolution.

Use the foundation's mission, values and program priorities to guide decisionmaking. When members disagree, use these founding principles to center the discussion and help forge a solution. Indeed, it is the mission that drives the foundation and its activities.

Recognize the traditional style of interaction of the foundation board and develop facilitation methods that build upon the strengths of the group. For example, some boards use a consensus model of decisionmaking, achieved after weighing everyone's input; some boards prefer to receive plenty of information and evidence of research and investigation before making decisions; others like to address pragmatic issues and focus on outcomes. A retreat is not a replica of board meetings (in fact, breaking the mold stimulates fresh approaches), but the format should promote comfort and the expectation of practical outcomes.

One session cannot solve or resolve the foundation's central challenges or opportunities. However, by staying focused on the objectives, the board can achieve closure on a few key issues. The facilitator should keep an "issues bin" tablet during the retreat to record themes, ideas or suggestions to explore later.

How do you evaluate a retreat's success? By setting written objectives, the board can assess if these were met. The board's sense of accomplishment, smoother operation and its ability to identify specific outcomes achieved are measurements of a retreat's effectiveness. Finally, the board's enthusiasm to have another retreat in the future is among the highest testimonies of the success.

Lee Draper is president of Draper Consulting Group, a firm that has provided services to grantmakers in California and the Pacific Northwest since 1990. This article is based on workshops she's presented at recent Council on Foundations' Family Foundation Conferences.



Looking for a Good Facilitator?

- The Council on Foundations recently established a Governing Board Practices program, which can assist with resources on facilitators. Contact Ellen Bryson at 202/467-0438 or bryse@cof.org
- Regional associations of grantmakers (RAGs) often maintain lists of potential facilitators and consultants. For a list of RAGs, see www.rag.org
- Nonprofit resource and support centers frequently provide referrals to qualified and experienced retreat facilitators. They may also have guides, resource materials and other publications that can be helpful in planning board retreats.

—L.D.

The Flintridge Foundation's Experience

The Flintridge Foundation is a family foundation located in Pasadena, California. It was founded in 1984 by Francis and Louisa Moseley with a \$12 million endowment. Today, the foundation's board of family and community members carries on a tradition of community involvement through four program areas: community services, conservation, theater and visual arts.

The foundation had a very general mission statement from its earliest days. But, with time, it was no longer relevant to the foundation's work and wasn't used to guide the organization or its programs. In its place, the board developed written statements that described purpose and programmatic priorities for each of its program areas.

In 1998, the foundation embarked on a process to more accurately define its mission, values and philosophy. It also sought to develop a strategic focus for the following five years, give the anticipated significant growth in its allocations. The board retreat was a focal point in the process.

Respondents are Alex Moseley, president of the board; Jaylene Moseley, managing director; Armando Gonzalez, board member.

What were your initial reactions to the concept of having a retreat?

Alex Moseley: Gulp! You mean we have to talk about what we have not been able to talk about for ten years? Will the doors be locked? Is anyone armed? What about disagreement? What about family dynamics? What if this doesn't work? Will we be worse off than if we hadn't done it? It was a pretty anxious anticipation.

Jaylene Moseley: I was somewhat anxious because I didn't know what to expect and thought the board would be discussing issues that would likely include differences of opinion. After speaking with our consultant, I realized that more than one session would be required to thoughtfully accomplish our task.

Was the level of planning and preparation helpful? Was it worth the effort?

Alex Moseley: The extension of the process was a real benefit in several ways. It follows the famous quote from Samuel Johnson about making a speech; "tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them; and then tell them what you told them." Preparation, preparation and preparation. As someone who took part in the planning, I became aware of the benefits early in the process and aware of what we were going to "tell them." The process of gathering and visualizing historical and structural information about the foundation set up a framework through which to view our past, present and to imagine the future. That information-gathering process gave me more comfort with open discussion and differing views. The extension and forethought also promoted serious consideration and reflection; not just an afternoon of shooting from the hip that loses support soon after. "Sleeping on it" really works.

Was it helpful to have an outside facilitator? What were the advantages?

Alex Moseley: It was essential to the success of the process. There was some consideration by our director that she would do it, and that there would be benefits in having an "insider" coax the board through the process. Also some of the board members had more than

a hint of mistrust and discomfort with "outside opinions" about what and how we were doing. I say the retreat would not have been as successful, smooth or forward looking without the outside advantage of the consultant's thoughtful leadership. There were too many minefields, armed and ticking just under the surface, for people too close to the family issues.

How did participating in the retreat affect you and your involvement with the foundation?

Armando Gonzalez: For me, it had a profound effect. It helped us form some guiding principles in a time of growth in the foundation. Personally, it gave me a better focus into the future.

Jaylene Moseley: I found that our discussions and our success in reaching consensus increased my respect for the foundation's board members, and I left the retreat with a greater sense that we were moving forward together.

How did the retreat affect the board overall?

Alex Moseley: There is greater confidence that we can work more openly, as a unit and less as jostling factions. It appears to be the nature of groups to segment into units of control and similar persuasions. This is more likely and more charged when families work together.

Armando Gonzalez: The tangible impact: A written document that was authored as a result of the work. The intangible impact: The retreat created a collaborative spirit that the board and staff garnered together.

Will retreats become a periodic process for the board? What role do they play, as opposed to regular board business meetings?

Alex Moseley: Board retreats should be used sparingly so they don't lose their effect. On the other hand, getting away from normal business, physically and mentally, is a great way to get increased creation and absorption of new ideas.

Jaylene Moseley: I think we have learned that retreats provide the time and process for long-term planning and for engaging in more contemplative dialogue than our regular meetings allow.

Do you have any suggestions for family foundations that are considering organizing their first board retreat?

Alex Moseley: First, I'd say, buckle up! Second, select your facilitator very carefully. Don't just go to the Yellow Pages or pick someone another foundation heard about last year. They are not all good, and they're not all right for you. Matching the facilitator meticulously to the organization and its crosscurrents cannot be over-emphasized. Third, give much careful thought to planning and how to involve and positively engage the board members. Don't spring a plan on them when they show up by the pool on the day of the retreat.

Armando Gonzalez: Hold the retreat in a comfortable, inspiring environment. And, allow candid, free dialogue and differing opinions by the board members. Rely on the collective wisdom of the board and not on individual agendas.

Jaylene Moseley: Document the important decisions/agreements you reach, and use the document often in creative ways to reinforce what you learned/decided.

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