

Governing Board Retreats

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Does your board of commissioners or city council have a hard time resolving members' different views about controversial agenda items, usually leaving somebody mad about the results? Is one or more of your members driven to distraction trying to satisfy citizen complaints while the administration grouches about meddling in administrative matters? Do a few of your members seem always to get angry at each other over every disagreement they have?

No governing board is cursed with all of these problems, but most have experienced at least one of them from time to time. Each of these problems is a signal that the board's process is getting in the way of its products—that what it does suffers from how it goes about doing it. A board needs at least four conditions to function effectively. First, it needs vision, including a clear, agreed-upon set of beliefs and goals to guide its governance. The board does not have to agree totally on this vision for the community, but there should be some common basis for unity. Second, a board needs plans. It needs to map out how it will go about achieving those goals upon which members clearly agree and whether it will try to resolve major policy issues on which they do not agree. This helps to establish a third condition. The board and its administration need to have clear and reasonable expectations of each other so that everyone knows what role he or she is expected to play in achieving goals and resolving conflict. Finally, members of the board and the administration need to be able to work as a team, even during the inevitable conflicts and disagreements. This requires building trust that each member will work for the board's visions and developing the skills to work always as individuals who are also part of a team.

Few governing boards are fortunate enough to create these four basic conditions in the natural course of events. Most have to work at it. New governing board members find themselves together with four to twelve other persons who were chosen by someone else: are varied in their knowledge, skills, and experience; and are expected to produce immediate and effective results as a group. The one dear tie that binds them—service on the board—gives scant guidance for evaluating specific decisions and actions. Those who have never served on the board might have no idea what they can reasonably expect of other board members and often have little or no experience in

working effectively in a group setting. Thus, most boards need to spend part of their time together developing the basic conditions for effective operation.

The regular meeting is ill-suited for pulling the board together into a working team. There is rarely any time-out from the steady stream of routine business. The demands that immediate problems make on attention, energy, and time crowd out those items that have neither strong advocates nor immediate consequences. The board usually is left to deal with long-range thinking, planning, and process issues at the end of a regular meeting, when it has neither the time nor the energy to do them justice.

The setting of the regular meeting also tends to stifle team building. The regular meeting's controlled formality discourages spontaneous and creative thinking and communication. Moreover, board members risk appearing foolish by acting spontaneously and creatively before the large audience at a regular meeting. Special meetings or work sessions held in the same place but at another time do not work much better. Members hardly can resist discussing current problems or issues that are worrying them, and the atmosphere of the regular meeting lingers and haunts the special session, chilling the free exchange of ideas.

Different Time, Different Place, Different Thing

Many governing boards use a retreat to overcome the barriers that the regular meeting and its usual environment place in the way of building teamwork and setting directions. The governing board and any number of its top management staff that the board wants to include literally retreat from the normal patterns of the workplace to think, talk, and plan about how they will do their work.

The retreat is very different from a regular meeting. Developing beliefs and goals, making plans, clarifying roles, and building teamwork all take a lot of concentrated time and attention. The retreat is an opportunity to focus for a long time on a single question—how to work together—without the pressure of a loaded agenda. Consequently, a retreat typically lasts one or two days, during which as few as only one or two issues are dealt with, and the board usually agrees in advance how much it will attempt to do in the time available. By going away from the

What Some Boards Have Done on Their Retreats

The exact format and content of a retreat varies according to what the board wishes to accomplish. The vignettes below briefly describe what several North Carolina boards have done at their retreats over the past few years.

- The largely new council and the new mayor were unclear about exactly what they could accomplish during their terms and exactly how they should go about it. They spent a lot of time discussing their ideas about the respective roles of the mayor, the mayor pro tem, the council, and the city manager. They listed, discussed, and clarified specific expectations they had of each other. The group then discussed how it should make decisions. Members participated in an exercise to test the effectiveness of consensus building as an alternative to majority voting. Finally, the board listed all those matters that would command its attention during the next five years and established a time table for setting priorities among these issues.

- The mostly new governing board was unhappy with the performance of the manager and wanted to identify and resolve the specific sources of its dissatisfaction. Discussion revealed that the previous board had expected the manager to be aggressive in recommending policies for the board to adopt; however, the new board was interested in providing its own policy direction and in having the manager serve largely to carry out the wishes of the board. The group carefully delineated and clarified what the board expected of the manager and what the manager expected of the board. Participants negotiated a clear agreement of what roles the board as a whole, individual members, and the manager would play in decision making and administration.

- In two separate retreats, the governing board developed a management-by-objectives process to help it to achieve a four-year agenda. In the first retreat, the board and the manager developed a set of beliefs that would guide the city's planning and management process and broad goals for the next four years. In the second retreat, the board, the manager, and key staff decided on a process and a schedule for developing a management-by-objectives system. Finally, the board instructed the manager on how he should report progress on the system's development.

- For the first time in many years, there were two new members on the board. The board held a retreat to orient the new members, to make them a part of the group, and probably to learn more about these "strangers." The board concentrated on developing a set of basic beliefs about the community and its governance and on sharing expectations among the commission, the chairman, and the manager. This group found that it helped to start with a discussion of goals each of them would like the board to have over the next five or ten years. Members then looked at these goals and discussed what kind of basic beliefs about government they implied. Finally, the board concentrated its discussion of expectations on those which members had of each other in personal dealings and in the conduct of county business.

regular meeting place, the board can create a relaxed, informal, creative atmosphere in which to work. By disassociating itself from the time and the place of the regular meeting with its cluttered agenda and formal structure, participants can approach their task with a fresh perspective. While the personal risk of being open and creative seems lower in the relaxed atmosphere of the retreat, participants usually sense that it is, at the same time, higher because they cannot fall back on old protective patterns built around limited time, parliamentary procedure, and custom. Thus, the retreat, by its timing, location, and nature, leads everyone to expect that this is a special event, for a special purpose, and not just business as usual. This difference makes it easier for the governing board and top management to pay particular attention to the unusual business for which they have gathered: focusing on the processes they use to accomplish their work.

Making a retreat a special event is an important ingredient in achieving its goals: however, that alone will not guarantee its success. If what happens at the retreat does not improve the way the board functions by changing board members' attitudes, knowledge, and behavior, then participants will quite rightly view it as a waste of time and will be unlikely to allow their time to be wasted on the same kind of activity again. Thorough preparation, careful execution, and thoughtful follow-up all increase the chances of success.

Preparing for the Retreat

Thorough preparation will help to make the most of the valuable time that board members have together in this special setting. It will also help to prevent surprises or last-minute fumbling that could distract participants from the tasks at hand. Preparations should be made to have everything and everyone in place at the start.

Decide on the participants. Everyone on the board should participate. One of the major objectives of any retreat is to develop some unity among members about major aims and behavior within the group, wherever the board can find it. Nobody doubts that they will disagree often about the substance of specific matters that come before the board; however, if the members handle these matters with mutual understanding and respect, the board will be more effective. It is important—whatever agreement

can be reached about behavior, expectations, goals, or basic beliefs—that every member share in that understanding. It takes only one person who is not a part of the process to undermine the effectiveness of such consensus. Great care should be taken to choose a time that clearly is acceptable to every member so all can attend. Many boards have found that if a member is persuaded to agree to a time reluctantly, it is very likely that he or she will cancel at the last minute or simply not show up.

Who participates in the retreat besides members of the governing board varies greatly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Boards in cities and counties with a manager invariably include him or her, for the manager is clearly in close partnership with the governing board in all of its work. If other members of the administration work particularly closely with the board, they might also be included. Some boards ask their attorneys or clerks to participate, and some invite appointed finance officers because financial factors dominate their decision making. This choice is entirely the board's. However, the board should be cautious about casting the net too broadly. If the group becomes too large, then communication becomes harder, less personal, and less open. Also, the inclusion of persons on the fringe or outside of the governing board's closest working relationships might inhibit honest and open expression of feelings and ideas, thereby defeating one of the retreat's fundamental purposes.

Find a skilled facilitator. A participant cannot facilitate the group's work and participate in it effectively as well. Participants will work very hard over their chosen issues, and it simply is too much to expect of one person to give the issues total attention if he or she is also responsible for facilitating the discussion. Also, one of the facilitator's most difficult tasks is to draw out all participants to ensure that all views are expressed, even when this involves leading the group into conflict. To do this well requires not only skill and experience but a disassociation from the group and the issues that a participant is unlikely to have.

The facilitator's job in a retreat is to monitor the direction of the board's work, alert it when it moves off-track, and clear obstacles from its path. He or she normally accomplishes this by doing five things:

1. Directing the board's efforts toward its objectives but being flexible enough to change direction if the board makes a conscious decision to do so;
2. Constantly challenging participants to clarify their expressions and intentions;
3. Helping participants to summarize and present data and information without distorting it with his or her own perspective;
4. Helping the board to crystallize conflict and to manage it by suggesting approaches for resolving it; and

5. Helping the board to agree on a plan of action to accomplish any decisions it reaches during the retreat.

Skilled facilitators are often available from nearby universities or community colleges, the Institute of Government, or private consulting firms. The facilitator should be chosen early in the preparations so that the board can satisfy itself that it will be comfortable with whomever is chosen and so that the facilitator can participate in planning for the time, the setting, and the agenda. There are several things that a board might look for in choosing a good facilitator. He or she should:

1. Be interested in helping the board to clarify and accomplish its own objectives and not have his or her own set agenda;
2. Engender a feeling of complete trust at the very first meeting;
3. Listen well;
4. Be aware of the importance of having concrete results from the retreat;
5. Have training and experience in working with small groups to accomplish concrete results; and
6. Be able to help the board to evaluate how much personal and political risk would be involved in what it wants to accomplish at the retreat.

Often the mayor and the manager meet with a prospective facilitator to plan the agenda and evaluate the facilitator at the same time. In this initial meeting, the facilitator can help to sharpen the objectives of the retreat, define clear roles for facilitator and participants, and help to estimate how much personal and political risk participants are likely to be comfortable with.

Choose the location and time. The only suggested rule for location and time is not to use the regularly scheduled meeting time or place. Beyond that, the retreat should be held any place where the board members will feel comfortable, relaxed, and undistracted. Retreat settings in North Carolina have included a private island, hotel meeting rooms, conference centers, the Institute of Government, church camps, and corporate retreat centers loaned by local businesses. They have varied from very luxurious to very spartan, with everything in between. Most, but not all, have been outside the jurisdiction that the board served.

Most boards choose a one-day or two-day format. Less than one day is probably not effective. Even if only one issue is to be taken up, having the group together for less than 24 hours does not allow the time necessary to pay due concern to how things are done. It is likely that a group will leave feeling a little frustrated that it has not really been able to tie off the matter at hand and to see definitive progress or agreement. More than two days is more time than most elected officials can take away from

home or work, and usually everyone is tired out at the end of two solid days of effort.

Observe the open meetings law. Despite the desirability of making the retreat a closed meeting to encourage open and honest discussion, it is nonetheless an official meeting under the state's open meetings law.¹ Some boards feel that if they do not take action or discuss specific pending business, the open meetings law does not apply; however, most of what is discussed at any retreat would constitute deliberation and, therefore, would require an open meeting. It is unlikely that any of the subject-matter exceptions for which closed or executive sessions are permitted would be an appropriate topic on which to hold a board retreat. Thus, to comply with the open meetings law on a retreat, the governing board must call a special meeting or announce it as a continuation of a regular meeting that has been adjourned or recessed. It must give all required notices in either case.

Deal assertively with publicity. Sometimes news media send reporters to retreats but not in every case. It depends on the attitude of the local newspapers, radio, and television, the relationship the board has with them, and probably the other requirements for coverage that face the news directors during the time the retreat is held. In North Carolina, when news reporters have attended, their presence has varied in its intensity. In one case, representatives of all three media, newspapers, radio, and television, stayed throughout a two-day retreat, including all of the meals board members had together. On the other extreme, some reporters have dropped in once to see what was happening and have left after less than an hour.

Coverage of retreats has usually been favorable when a reporter was present, probably because he or she saw firsthand how hard members worked, how seriously they took the effort, and how productive the results were. Bad press has tended to come from persons who did not attend and who implied that the board went off to relax at the taxpayers' expense. The board might counter this kind of coverage in advance by explaining the value of what it is doing and what it expects to achieve, by preparing to respond to criticism without embarrassment, and by resolving to obtain concrete results that will be visible in the way it conducts its business after the retreat. All successful businesses use retreats to help them to operate more effectively, and the board has no cause to be defensive about doing the same thing to make government more effective.

The board should try to determine whether news representatives plan to attend and, if so, prepare to include them graciously. At the same time, members should be aware that the presence of reporters surely will affect the openness of discussion, and they should be prepared to accept less productive results than might be the case if they were alone.

Conducting the Retreat

Thorough preparation for the retreat should put everything in place before it starts. Although the setting is relaxing, the retreat itself will not be. For this reason, several things should be done during the retreat so that participants gain the trust, the knowledge, and the insights that will help them to operate better as a governing board.

Assemble the night before. This ensures that everyone will be on hand to start promptly the next morning. It is also useful to gather the group together for a short time to greet each other. If not all board members know the facilitator, he or she can get to know everybody before the work begins. Some boards have only a short reception with refreshments or a meal together for this gathering, but even an hour or so of work on this first evening can be a good time to establish clear expectations about the retreat itself. Each member might say what he or she expects to get out of the retreat. If the group believes that it cannot meet all of the expectations on the list, then it can try to reach consensus on how much it will try to achieve. At this time the role of the facilitator can also be agreed upon—for example, how much the group wants him or her to lead discussion as opposed to simply recording it and asking for clarification when necessary. After this meeting, participants should retire early and get a good night's rest so that they are fresh and ready to start work the next morning.

Start on time, work hard, and quit when there's nothing more to do. Starting promptly sets a serious and businesslike tone for the retreat. Moreover, there is usually less time available than anyone thinks. It should not be wasted. To a group that is accustomed to dispatching dozens of agenda items in a few hours, a whole day or two can seem to stretch ahead interminably—that is, until the discussion begins to deepen, as it invariably does. Then, in many instances, the time available becomes too short.

The special effort that goes into setting up a retreat is aimed mainly at promoting frank and open exchange of beliefs, feelings, and data. Therefore, participants should expect to share openly during the retreat and to exert the extra effort that candor often requires. Openness can be risky in the environment of a regular meeting for political reasons. It can still be risky in a retreat for personal reasons. Participants have to deal with the dual risks of self-revelation and conflict throughout a retreat. This is hard work. The facilitator often must take responsibility for drawing out participants in order to resolve issues—often through open conflict—but the real stress and strain of this process ultimately falls on the participants. It is no surprise that, after a day's work at a retreat, almost everyone retires quickly for a good night's sleep.

When the group has finished its work, the retreat should end, even if that happens earlier than everyone

expected. If the retreat has been successful, participants might be tired, but they also will be buoyed by a sense of accomplishment. It is better to end with such a feeling than to allow it to dissipate by lingering aimlessly after the job is finished.

Seek consensus and pinpoint disagreement. One of the valuable products that can come out of a retreat is a clear sense of where board members agree and where they disagree on issues of substance or procedure. While it is worthwhile to find areas of agreement, it is just as important to clarify areas of disagreement.

Consensus is a difficult process, but it is very effective in getting total commitment to the group's decisions. It is difficult because it requires persistent discussion and reasoning to bring everyone together. Deciding by vote occurs as soon as a majority agrees, but voting does not persuade the minority—it only overrules it. At worst, it can create saboteurs of the action that the vote has dictated. Deciding by compromise means somebody gives up a position in exchange for support on something else, closure of the issue, or avoidance of conflict. Compromise is not as hard on those who disagree with the decision as voting is, but it does not make them favor the decision either. Consensus requires that participants talk and use facts and reason to convince everyone that a given action is the best thing to do under the circumstances. It might take a long time, but when the decision is made, everyone agrees with it even though it might not be ideal to some. The setting and the time available for discussion in a retreat make it conducive to achieving high-quality decisions by consensus.

In those instances where consensus cannot be reached, it is important to delineate other views that participants hold. This step establishes that, even if they hold minority positions on an issue, their views and the reasons for them are not insignificant but are recognized as legitimate. It also clarifies for other board members who stands where on what issues and why. The use of reasons for positions throughout these discussions tends to separate people's positions from their personalities. This distinction makes it easier to disagree with each other without disliking each other. The board might simply highlight positions of disagreement or might try to decide on a strategy and a timetable for resolving the disagreement if that is important.

Evaluate the experience. One way to get clues about how successful the retreat has been is to ask the participants to evaluate it. An evaluation both indicates whether a retreat would be worthwhile to do again and allows members of the board to review what went on, how it affected them individually and as a group, and how well it served its purpose.

Decide on some definite next steps. If the board is to use what it develops at the retreat, it should decide on some concrete steps to take after returning home. Two

obvious actions to consider are how the board will practice or use skills, attitudes, and knowledge and to what extent it wants to make formal statements on the beliefs, goals, and understandings it articulated. Experience has shown that if the board does not make these decisions before it leaves the retreat, it probably will not do so later on.

Using the Results of the Retreat

Thorough planning and careful execution can make a retreat seem productive and send participants away feeling good about what they did. However, what they did at the retreat does not matter as much as what they do when they return to the board's normal environment. Thoughtful application of the skills, attitudes, and knowledge developed at the retreat is the deciding factor in whether the retreat will help the board to operate more effectively.

Use it or lose it. The ultimate value of the consensus reached at a retreat is its application in day-to-day business, which is the fundamental reason for holding the retreat. If the board reaches consensus on a basic set of beliefs about how things should be in the community, then those beliefs can be used to guide day-to-day decisions. Members can ask themselves and the group in any instance, "Is this action consistent with our basic beliefs about governing the community?" It is a powerful way to bring policy debate back to basics and to focus on the critical aspects of an issue. Goals developed at retreats can be used in the same way. Plans of action can be used as checklists to monitor the board's progress on its long-range agenda. Agreements on roles of board members, manager, staff, and other boards and commissions can be referred to when conflicts arise over responsibility or authority for routine business. Finally, members can use their better understanding of each other and any new interpersonal skills they developed and practiced during the retreat to reduce the interference of personal conflicts with the substantive issues in their regular meetings and business. If the board does not keep sight of these things and use them on a routine basis, they will soon be forgotten and have little or no effect on the board's work. Thus, the retreat is not an end in itself but a point of departure for a continuous effort to improve the board's effectiveness.

Show off what was done. One way the board can keep the accomplishments of the retreat fresh in its members' minds and, at the same time, demonstrate them to citizens is to publish the results. Some boards have simply posted lists of beliefs, goals, role expectations, or plans in the regular meeting place for everyone to see and refer to from time to time. Some boards have published them in the newspaper along with a brief report about how the board developed them.

Selected Products from Retreats

The statements below are an assortment of beliefs, goals, and expectations which various governing boards school boards and staffs have developed for themselves at retreats held in North Carolina during the last several years.

Beliefs

The city council should be proactive in identifying and solving problems, not reactive (governing board).

There are practical limits to what the board can do: the board should be realistic (governing board).

We should educate every child in our school system to his or her full potential (school board).

We shall be persistent in pursuit of our ideas; however when those ideas are without support we shall react professionally and move on to other activities (staff).

We shall create an atmosphere of caring and respect for one another. People in the organization are its most important asset and are vital to its success (staff).

Council should listen to the public but not be expected to support every voice before it (governing board).

Goals

To stimulate among citizens a greater interest in participating in city government (governing board).

To increase the number of blacks in key positions in the next five years (governing board).

To expand revenues enough to meet the cost of existing and new service needs (governing board).

To build an effective relationship with the [neighboring] town of _____ (governing board).

To develop partnerships between area businesses and schools (school board).

To make administrative decisions and actions always consistent with policies and practices of city council (staff).

Expectations

Boards have expected their managers to:

Keep the governing board fully informed.

Take initiative in recommending policy and urge the board to reconsider when appropriate.

Seek policy direction from the board and fully support the board's decision once it is made.

Maintain good relationships with other governments.

Managers have expected their boards to:

Issue directions as a body, not individually.

Stand behind the manager and staff when they are carrying out board policy.

Handle job seekers according to personnel ordinance and procedures and not apply pressure to hire.

Take initiative to get information and stay informed.

Other boards have taken belief statements and tried to summarize them in a succinct "mission statement" that is widely circulated and used on a regular basis to aid policy making at many levels. (See box at left for the kind of statements produced at retreats.) Keeping the product of the retreat before everybody serves to demonstrate some of the retreat's concrete accomplishments as well as to keep it foremost in the minds of board members and staff so that it will be used in the day-to-day work of governance.

Deciding Whether a Retreat Would Be Useful

The structure and setting of a retreat can produce conditions that will help the board work through some issues that it cannot deal with effectively in its regular environment. But the structure and setting alone cannot guarantee success. The willingness and ability of the participants to work together and to apply the results of the retreat in their regular public business is essential. If members of the board do not believe that the retreat is worthwhile, or if they do not believe it is worth the cost in money, time, effort, and risk, then it might not be worth doing. Based on the discussion above, a board might ask itself the following set of questions in considering whether to hold a retreat:

1. Would everyone on the board participate in the entire retreat?
2. Would a setting be available that would be conducive to open discussion and consensus building?
3. Could it be held at a time when members could get away and when they would not be distracted by pressing business?
4. Could the board find a facilitator who is competent and whom it trusts to be objective?
5. Could the board work effectively with the press present if necessary or are the issues too sensitive?
6. Could the board live with criticism from those who misunderstand or disagree with the usefulness of a retreat?
7. Would those members of the board who are skeptical or anxious be willing to make a conscientious effort to make it work?
8. Would the board be likely to use the products of the retreat when it returns to the regular routine?

If the board could not answer yes to a substantial number of these questions, the retreat might not be worth the required cost and risk. This decision is one that each board has to make for itself.

Retreats for Other Groups

While a retreat of a governing board and top staff is the most common use of this kind of meeting, it can be useful for other groups as well. The retreat can be an effective way for the governing board to discuss mutual beliefs, goals, and expectations with one or more of its advisory boards and commissions. School boards have

held retreats with their superintendents and top management staff. Superintendents hold retreats with the principals in their systems. City managers and county managers have used retreats to do administrative goal setting and planning with their top department heads and staff. In short, many different groups of people whose effectiveness depends on their ability to share common beliefs and goals, to have clear and reasonable expectations of each other, and to work well together on a day-to-day basis have used retreats to build the unity of effort needed to do the best job possible. ❖

Note

1. N.C. Gen Stat. § 143-318.9 through -318.18(19).

