

FINANCIAL TIMES

Leading View

March 8, 2013 4:48 pm

After the retreat, there's no turning back

By Anthony Goodman

Company offsites are often derided but can be useful if they are well organised.

The email goes out. We need an “offsite”. The heart sinks. Another wasted two days in a value hotel in the back of beyond. These days you can't even escape to the golf course after a session for fear of how it might look.

Yet the number of companies taking their executive teams on retreats continues to rise. [Forbes](#) reported last year that “retreat trips are coming back smaller, shorter and with much fuller agendas than before”. Why is the offsite coming back?

During my professional career, I have attended many offsites as both a facilitator and a participant. I have witnessed transformational moments in the lives of people and companies.

I have also seen some bizarre activities, from the executive team who used chess pieces to explain their power positions in the hierarchy to adults stepping through a “walk of life” recounting significant events in their early childhood.

You can see why there are sceptics. Eileen Shapiro in her book *Fad Surfing In The Boardroom* writes: “Retreats. The wonderful paradox of going backward when you want to go forward, evidently effective due to being conducted at posh, out-of-the-way locations (preferably with good golf courses).”

However, [Chief Executive magazine's CEO Confidence Index research](#) showed that “most CEOs put a lot more effort into the retreat planning process than simply worrying about the hotel's proximity to golf courses.”

The “AIG effect” put paid to the posh hotels after 2008 when it emerged that executives from that company spent more than \$400,000 on a retreat one week after taking a federal bailout. It has taken several years for companies to return to the idea of luxury retreats after keeping offsites under tight cost control in the intervening period.

In fact, Antonia Macaro and Julian Baggini recently reported in the FT Magazine that companies are now using [actual monastic retreats](#) in the UK for their offsite meetings: “Ampleforth, Douai Abbey and Worth have all run retreats or courses for corporate customers.” Perhaps hairshirts improve leadership discussions more than Callaway golf shoes.

Why do leaders need retreats and what do they really achieve?

A former colleague says that retreats “fall into two camps: those that focus on all the infighting among the leadership team, and those that focus on the external issues the organisation needed to come together to address”.

Maarten Asser, a partner at Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Culture Learning Group, who runs retreats for his clients says: “Organisations do retreats because they wish to disconnect themselves from the daily grind of the ‘office’ atmosphere.”

He adds: “Provided that they are well-designed and senior leaders are willing to fully commit in word and deed to the goals of the event, retreats and offsites can be springboards to get organisations reset and realigned.”

The Harvard Business Review considered the question of value a few years ago in an [article called “Offsites that work.”](#) The authors conclude that a successful offsite “can align executives, galvanize corporate performance, and strengthen the company’s position in its industry.”

Those of us who have been to retreats know that the recipe for a successful offsite is a clear agenda on an important topic for the business, preparing ahead to focus the mind in advance, a reasonable location that provides a chance to get away from daily work life (leaving smartphones at the door), and a good facilitator – preferably from outside the company – together with a plan to follow up after the meeting.

Often retreats do provide magic moments of insight but too often executives return to the workplace and find that while they believe themselves transformed, the rest of the company is the same as it ever was. Like many training interventions, the effects can diminish over time.

The HR handbook *Retreats That Work* notes: “A successful retreat can be a peak experience for everyone involved. People come to work excited about new initiatives, about the collegial spirit they have experienced, and about everything they have learned. Then they have to go right back to work on the same old stuff that was on their desks before they left.”

Dik Veenman, managing director of The Right Conversation, an executive coaching company based in Cambridge, in the UK, says: “Habits do not change just because the setting has – they need to be explicitly acknowledged and worked with. [The risk is] the same quality of dialogue does not take place at other times during the year.”

Those who go to the retreat have to hold themselves accountable for its continued impact in the business. If there has been a change in strategy, or simply a cessation in the infighting, then it is up to the participants to ensure there can be no turning back after the retreat.

This article first appeared on FT.com.