

Annual Law Firm Retreats for Small Firms

by Arthur G. Greene

Why is the annual retreat thought of as a big firm strategy? Well, it is true – holding retreats as a planning vehicle is far more common in large firms. But, retreats for small firms is just as important.

A retreat involves setting aside a day or two for the lawyers to go off site and, in an uninterrupted environment, conduct a planning session. Unlike large firms, the lawyers in small firms tend to have less time and ignore developing plans and strategies for the future. They don't meet regularly to work on mounting firm issues. Day to day matters get all the attention. Lawyers in small firms work hard serving their clients, but often at the expense of the necessary planning for their own success.

The recent recession has brought changes to the practice of law. It is no longer *good enough* to just show up at the office each day and work as hard as you are able. Times have changed. What made your firm successful in the past will not make it successful in the future. One by one, lawyers are recognizing that a well thought out five year strategic plan is not just for big firms.

The Retreat

A retreat is by far the best approach – perhaps the only effective approach – to planning activities for a small firm. Off site retreats are often the most productive.

They usually involve an overnight stay, perhaps starting on Friday and ending Saturday afternoon. Sometimes a half day or full day retreat is satisfac-

tory. The retreat can be for the partners only, but small firms often involve all lawyers. Some firms limit the initial session to partners, who are then joined by all lawyers on the second day.

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If Walls Could Talk



If your walls could talk, what would they say about the effectiveness of your communication skills?

One of the most discerning aspects of managing people hinges on communication. With emailing, texting and social networks, forms of electronic communications today seem endless, so do the pitfalls. All of this demonstrates one thing. People want to communicate.

But there is more to passing on and exchanging information than telecommunications can provide. Nothing replaces the one to one exchange. Decades ago, business guru, Tom Peters, advocated the doctrine, *Managing by Walking Around*. He compelled business owners to engage in open discussion with employees. The practice became a hallmark for success.

Peters' theory is even more important today. Excellence in business still comes from staying engaged with fellow workers on all levels. For law firms, regular firm meetings and especially occasional Retreats can provide the glue that holds a firm together.

Kathy Fortin

There are many small lodging facilities that provide conference space and meals. A peaceful environment is surely a plus. Sitting on a porch listening to the loons across a quiet pond can do wonders to the retreat atmospherics.

The Goal

There are two different types of retreats. The first involves addressing a specific issue, for example (i) a strategic plan, (ii) improving profitability, (iii) developing a firm marketing plan, (iv) reconsidering the partner compensation system or (v) considering a merger or acquisition. Advanced planning is needed to position the issue for meaningful discussion. While decisions can be made at the retreat, it is often better to limit the retreat to a full discussion of the issue and leave the decision to a vote a week or two later.

The second type of retreat is an annual retreat that is part of an ongoing plan. For firms that hold annual retreats, there is usually a standard agenda that includes the annual budget, a review of progress made during the past year, an updating of the five year plan and addressing any

Activities

- In August, Arthur participated in a panel at the ABA Annual meeting in Toronto, on "The Once and Future Firm."
- In September, Arthur will address the Wyoming Bar Association on "Increasing Revenue" and "Succession Planning."
- The 2nd Edition of "Increasing Revenue: Unlocking the Profit Potential of Your Firm," first published in 2005, was released in August. It is available for purchase through the American Bar Association.
- In November, Arthur will be conducting a teleconference for Legus International Network of Leading Law Firms on "Shaping Partner Buy-outs."
- Arthur has been elected a Fellow of the American Bar Foundation.

particular issue that would benefit discussion in the retreat setting.

Other Benefits

Discussion of issues relating to the business of the law firm is the primary goal of a retreat. However, for firms that conduct retreats, there is one additional important element. The camaraderie and good will that develops among the lawyers during the session is worth the cost invested.

Services Rendered: Retreats



There are many approaches to retreat planning. A typical retreat assignment might include:

- Meeting to conduct an overview of the firm and decide issues and goals
- Pre-retreat planning and prepare relevant materials in advance of the retreat
- Prepare the Retreat Agenda
- Facilitate the retreat with a focus on achieving the goals set
- Present a session on a law firm management topic of interest
- Prepare a written summary of any consensus reached during the retreat

Try it once and see how valuable it will be to the firm during the ensuing year.

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