

PLANNING BOARD RETREATS

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Introduction

Planning a Board retreat is a process which begins months before the actual event, with results which last long after the last note is taken. The first issue to contend with is that of tone. What does the term *retreat* signify? Withdrawal, regress, revert, escape, turn tail? The connotations of the word *retreat* are not positive, especially when applied to fundraising! In our experience, the term *Advance* better describes both the objectives for meeting and intended outcomes resulting from a governing Board's commitment of time and attention to the important topics to be discussed.

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Prior to the Advance: Assessing your Organization's Needs

Most Advances – or retreats – are intended as vehicles for the delivery of information, involving very little dialogue and far too much monologue. These events are boring and tedious, seldom if ever productive, and attendance is, not surprisingly, limited. A successful Board Advance involves Board members from the outset in planning, setting objectives, and determining the course of *their* Advance.

The first step in planning the Advance is to select a small planning group, consisting of four to six people at most, to guide the process. In the three to six months prior to the Advance, they will meet to:

- discuss and refine as necessary Advance objectives;
- identify principal Board issues, concerns and/or opportunities to be addressed at the Advance;
- suggest ways to maximize Board member attendance and participation; and
- determine the logistical details.

Determining Advance Objectives

Warning! In bringing the Planning Group together for the first time, *do not* ask what they think the Advance's priorities should be. This is a good way to descend into discussions of individual objectives. Your preparation and presentation of a preliminary slate of objectives to the Planning Group can avoid this potential problem. Some examples of productive Advance objectives are to:

- focus the Board's attention on pressing funding needs of the organization;
- define the roles and responsibilities of Board members in securing financial resources;
- prepare Board members to contact and cultivate potential major donors, and to secure charitable gift and grant support;
- re-evaluate pressing funding needs.

Obtaining Board Input

Personal contact is the most reliable and efficient method of gaining the insights and support of your Board prior to holding an Advance. With the preliminary objectives in hand, divide up the names of members of the Board and assign them to members of the Planning Group. After its initial planning meeting, the Planning Group should go to the individual members of the Board and ask, 'What would you like to see at the Advance? What would you like to learn? What's on your mind?' Often Board members who never speak at Board meetings will relish the opportunity to air their concerns prior to and during an Advance. These concerns should be noted by members of the Planning Group for discussion at their next meeting.

Another method for gaining Board member insight is through Confidential Questionnaires. The anonymity provided by such a format will allow Board members to air issues that might otherwise be politely omitted from discussion. A sample questionnaire is included at the end of this document. This sample should be tailored for use by your unique organization; some questions will not be applicable and others will need to be added.

Note: Mail the questionnaires to Board members with a self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and handle the responses with discretion and confidentiality.

Deciding on Logistics

Where and when you hold your Advance can be crucial to its success. Comfortable and relaxed participants will have more stimulating discussions, walk away from the Advance with some good ideas and, most importantly, will feel that their time has not been wasted.

Location

Get away from the office and keep it relaxed. If the budget allows, a pleasant hotel with recreational activities can contribute to a great Advance. Or you can hold it in a quiet room in a restaurant. Don't make Board members dress up for the Advance. The key is keeping it as comfortable as possible for everyone involved.

Length

Don't start sessions before 8:30 a.m. (preceded by breakfast in vacation spots). In scheduling a session, we find that 1 ½ to 2 hours is the average person's maximum attention span for open, energetic discussion. Plan on serving coffee and milk, and perhaps light snacks, between sessions to reinvigorate the group.

Over the years we've found that a "working lunch" is not a good idea, nor is working straight through the day into the evening. It's preferable to end each day's sessions by 3:30 or 4:00 p.m. Our experience also indicates that two days of agenda items and activities, over and above social activities, is the maximum amount of time that one may expect participants to be constructive. Of course, there are no hard and fast rules; schedule the sessions to meet your own needs and circumstances.

Significant Others

Providing an opportunity for spouses and significant others to participate is an excellent idea, if possible. Whether acknowledged or not, Board members' significant others are often integral to the opinions and decisions the members bring to the table, and what is discussed at Board meetings (and at Advances!) is also discussed at home. Including significant others – at least in the broad-based discussions – stimulates and invigorates both the discussions and the follow-up efforts of Board members after the Advance has ended.

Materials

Anticipate the materials that will be needed at the Advance and prepare early. Using visual aids is an excellent idea, as many people learn and retain information better when it is presented visually. This will likely necessitate audio-visual equipment. Will you be using nametags or place cards during the sessions? If participants are staying overnight, what materials should be placed in their rooms prior to arrival?

Facilitators and Guest Speakers

A facilitator, whether hired from the outside or discovered within your own organization, is an excellent way to keep the Advance focused and on course. A facilitator fulfills many functions, and is also an excellent outside resource for Board Advance planning. A good facilitator:

- ensures maximum participation by all participants, making sure that that all Board members have a chance to state their points of view by preventing one member or a few from dominating the conversation;
- assists in adhering to the agenda, and allocates the correct amount of time for sessions and individual topics;
- provides clarity in oral communications, eliciting details that not everyone may know and probing for more information when she feels the subject has not been fully explored;
- ensures that the Advance ends with a summary and action steps that address the Advance's original objectives; and,

- has a sense of humor.

Never invite a guest speaker or a facilitator to your Advance unless someone you trust – who also has a working knowledge of your organization – has heard the potential guest speak or has attended a function that she facilitated.

The Planning Group's First Meeting: A Checklist

It's a good idea to walk away from your first meeting with some accomplishments, specifically:

- Select some preliminary Advance objectives, to be refined and solidified after gaining Board input;
- Determine the contents of a Confidential Board Questionnaire, and decide how and when it will be mailed out to the Board *or* Divide the Board membership among the members of the Planning Group in preparation for personal interviews.
- Discuss and establish to whatever extent possible the logistics of the Advance: budget, dates, location, materials that will be needed, and whether significant others will be included.
- Discuss retaining the services of a facilitator and/or guest speaker.
- Set a date for the next Planning Group meeting (approximately one month prior to the Advance).

Planning Group: One Month Prior to the Advance

The next planning session(s) will serve to finalize any logistical loose ends, compile Board Questionnaires and/or interviews, solidify the agenda of the Advance and arrange for its distribution.

The last planning session is also a good time to consider what will happen after the Advance. At the Advance itself, *action steps* should be drawn up summarizing and outlining the determinations of the Board for the months ahead, but making sure those action steps are carried out can be frustrating and difficult.

One technique for improving implementation is to ask Board members to write down how they personally are going to follow through on the Advance's action steps. Make

this one of the final Advance activities, after the summary but before anyone leaves. Put these written commitments in envelopes, seal them, and mail them back to their authors two months following the Advance.

Note: In setting up this exercise, be certain to let Board members know what's going to happen to their written commitments.

At the Advance

The Advance is where you will see all your dedicated planning pay off. Since the Board members themselves have determined the subjects and issues being discussed (and which *will not* be hashed over for the millionth time), conversation and discussion should be lively.

As each session ends, be sure to conclude with a consensus of action steps to be taken once the Advance is over. Keep an accurate list of these action steps for review at the end of the Advance, and distribute copies to the Board members.

Reviewing the Advance

Two weeks after the Advance, convene the Planning Group for a follow-up meeting. Discuss how it went, what could have been better, and compile a list of action steps to assist the next Planning Group in designing the next Advance. You may also wish to assign the Planning Group with responsibility for leading the implementation of the action steps resulting from the Advance.

A Final Word

Our many years of experience in planning and facilitating Board Advances has taught us one thing above all: there is always more to learn. If you have any insights, questions, or concerns about something we've overlooked, please let us hear from you.

SAMPLE CONFIDENTIAL BOARD QUESTIONNAIRE

[NAME OF ORGANIZATION]

☞ Confidential Board Questionnaire ☞

[Date]

In preparation for our Fund Raising Management Advance on [date], at [place], please complete the following questions and return in the envelope provided on or before [date]. Your candid responses are appreciated, and will not be attributed to you personally.

1. What are your personal reasons for involvement in [name of organization]'s governing board? Please rate in priority order (1 - 8).

- Sense of personal satisfaction
- Association with a highly regarded organization
- Serving people who are assisted by this organization
- Encouraged to accept the position by a close friend or associate
- Sense of community responsibility
- Belief in private enterprise as the proper approach to meeting this organization's goals
- Strong personal conviction as to the basic merit of this organization's goals and objectives
- Have been touched personally by the service(s) which this organization provides
- Other reason(s) (do not rate)

2. Do you feel that you are called upon to participate as a governing board member in a meaningful way? (Please check the one which is most applicable.)

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, could do more
- Yes, when asked
- No
- Don't know

3. Upon enlistment to the Board, what were your expectations about your roles and responsibilities?

4. How would you appraise the public image of this organization within the local community? (Please check the one which is most applicable.)

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor
- Don't know

5. What do you consider to be this organization's most current and pressing needs for contribution funding support? (Please be as specific as possible.)

Highest Priority:

High Priority:

Desirable:

6. Regarding the current overall leadership strength of this organization's governing board, please check the one which you find most applicable:

- Exceptional
- Good
- Adequate
- Weak
- Don't know

7. Do the current Board meetings meet your expectations? Please rank each of the following on a scale of 1 – 4. (1 = Excellent, 2 = Good, 3 = Fair, 4 = Poor)

- Frequency (X times a year)
- Time of day (XX a.m. – XX p.m.)
- Length of meeting (2 hours)
- Content
- Board member participation

8. Would you prefer more or less opportunities to interact with fellow Board members?

Professional Networking:

- less same more

Social Activities:

- less same more

9. How would you evaluate your personal potential and willingness to make a continuing, annual contribution to this organization?

- less than \$100
- \$100 - \$249
- \$250 - \$499
- \$500 - \$999

- \$1000 +
- Not willing and/or able to make a contribution

Additionally, how would you evaluate your personal potential to make a one-time, major contribution to this organization?

- Less than \$1,000
- \$1,000 - \$4,999
- \$5,000 - \$10,000
- \$10,000 +
- Not willing and/or able to make a contribution

10. Would you be willing to contact and solicit personally selected potential donors on behalf of this organization?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, time permitting
- Yes, reluctantly
- No
- Don't know

11. As this questionnaire is intended to provide the foundation from which to formulate the agenda for a productive and motivational Advance for all members of the Board, we ask you to reflect upon specific Board and [organization] issues that are of particular concern and interest to you. Your candid responses will be taken in confidence, and will not be reported in association with your name.

- 1.) _____

- 2.) _____

- 3.) _____
