

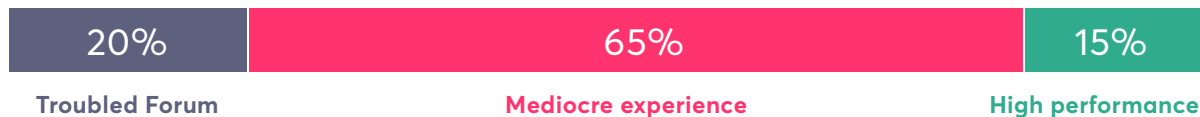
Creating powerful retreats

THE WHY

Why are you going on retreat?

1. Assess your Forum. Where are we right now as a Forum?

a. Assess Forum health: get quantitative (survey) and qualitative (members' candid thoughts) data.



2. Why are we going on this retreat? What do we want or need to accomplish?

3. **Develop a retreat theme/goal.** This positions you to make decisions to help the group move out of their comfort zone. A few examples of themes you might consider include: Rejuvenation, forging deeper relationships, personal growth, transitions, envisioning our future and more.

The physical environment

- Work to create the "summer camp" feeling. Think of communal living, a beach home or cottage vs an all-inclusive resort atmosphere.
- Be close to nature or —if in the city— find and embrace urban beauty.
- Do your group work in a good "living room space," with lots of natural light and windows vs a hotel meeting room.

Shift from left brain to right brain

- Create a non-meeting room setting or environment.
- Awaken the creative emotional brain with a meditation, fun or artistic exercise.
- Movement, music, art, poetry.

Balance: 1/3, 1/3, 1/3

- One-third group development work (prepared exercises/activities).
- One-third group activity (hiking, zip-lining, boating).
- One-third unstructured social time (preparing meals together, sitting around a fire).

The retreat as a fully integrated experience

You need a beginning, middle and end.

- Beginning: The opening session is for shifting gears, each member sharing their intention for the retreat, a warm-up (1-2 hours)
- Middle: Group development work should move toward a peak of emotional intensity in the middle of the retreat (4-8 hours over 1-2 days)
- End: The closing session is a time for appreciations, making commitments to doing things differently and to savour what you just experienced together.

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Retreat pitfalls

These things will diminish your retreat experience:

- 1. Loss of balance:**
 - a. All play – the group will feel the lack of substance.
 - b. All work – the group will leave feeling exhausted and cheated out of the location.
 - c. Over-structured down time – creativity and spontaneity will be stifled.
- 2. Allowing too many individual entry and exit points for individual members.**
- 3. Fragmentation—unregulated electronics access, breaks where members do different things.**
- 4. Poor location and space choice:**
 - a. Little to no connection with nature.
 - b. Hotel meeting room (too much like monthly meetings).
 - c. Separate hotel sleeping rooms where members disappear into their own worlds, via electronics, after hours.
- 5. One member facilitates the retreat. This member either loses their opportunity to participate as a member or manages to do both, but ends up exhausted.**

Qualities of a powerful retreat

1. The group has a powerful, emotional and moving experience.
2. An individual member has a life-changing “a-ha” new insight.
3. The group challenges itself to participate in an activity together that takes them out of their comfort zone, then talks about what they experienced.
4. Every member moves from a protective-ego stance to an unguarded, open, vulnerable stance.
5. Group members leave having learned something about each other, their Forum, themselves and their theme topic.

Choosing to engage a professional facilitator

You will maximize your retreat experience by engaging a professional facilitator. Forum best practice is to work with a professional facilitator at least every second year.

What skills does a professional facilitator bring?

- Expertise, creativity and customization in designing your retreat activities.
- A professional facilitator frees all members to fully participate in the group development work as members.
- A neutral, external, trained “set of eyes” to watch you work as a group. A facilitator is able to recognize group and individual dynamics and how these are affecting the group. They are capable of raising the group's awareness and changing patterns that are negatively impacting the Forum.
- A facilitator has the skills to help members open up and share more deeply than ever before.
- Facilitators are experienced in handling moments of intense emotion within a group (whether this is occurring due to disclosure or addressing a conflict). Facilitators can be a stable presence helping the group engage fully in these important moments, to resolve them and to learn from them.

Conclusion

Your annual retreat will be one of the most significant events of the year for the Forum. As Moderator, you should not take on the role of planning the retreat. But rather provide oversight and support to the retreat planners. Invest adequate time to prepare for the retreat or to engage a professional facilitator.