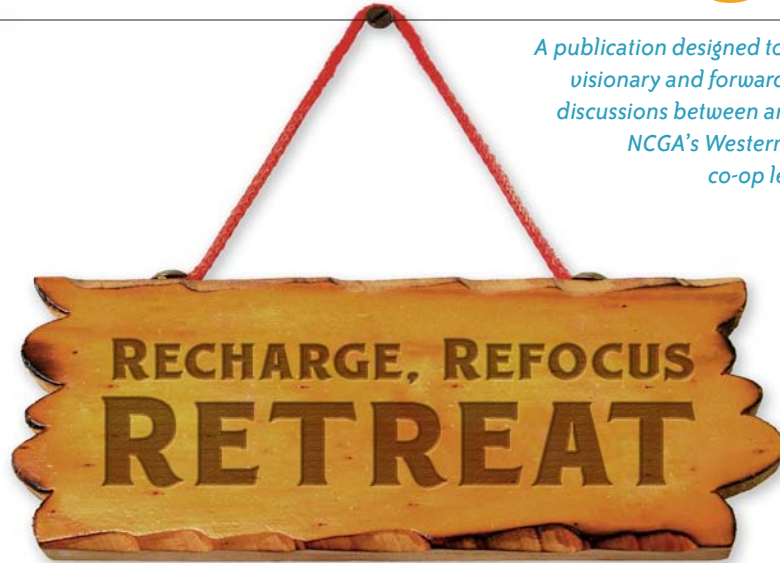


# LEADer

*A publication designed to promote visionary and forward-thinking discussions between and among NCGA's Western Corridor co-op leadership*



## A Study Guide for Co-op Leaders Focus on Board Retreats



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We're pleased to take on the topic of board retreats in this issue. We find retreats on the annual calendars of all high-functioning boards. Our own direct experience, as co-op directors and managers, is that a well-planned retreat can work wonders. It can help the board truly fulfill its leadership responsibilities and is invaluable in building and enhancing the sense of teamwork vital to an effective leadership body.

In this issue, the *LEADer* continues its new format as a study guide. First we offer articles to share key thoughts, observations, and techniques. Then we provide key questions to help guide board discussions and improvement in the topic area. The questions in this issue will help guide your retreat planning.

Once again, we hope you'll make time on your board agendas to talk about the articles and activities. In preparation for those discussions, be sure to bring in the experiences and expertise of others by reaching out to other co-op directors, leaders, and resources. And, as always, be sure to send us feedback on your experiences. Let us know what you think, what we could do to improve the *LEADer*, and what topics you'd love to see us cover in future issues.

## Meet the BEST in the West



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# LEADer

A publication designed to promote visionary and forward-thinking discussions between and among NCGA's Western Corridor co-op leadership

## More about the LEADer

- The LEADer is published quarterly and is distributed to enrolled directors and leaders of Western Corridor co-ops.
- We welcome your reactions, suggestions, and contributions, as well as questions for us to answer in future issues. Send comments or questions to [askthebest@ncga.coop](mailto:askthebest@ncga.coop).
- The next issue will be available in spring 2010. Key topics will be “What makes a great board member?” and board assessment.
- You can find information about the LEAD program and an online enrollment form at <http://www.cgin.coop/leader>.
- For more information about the NCGA, the Western Corridor, upcoming western regional board training events, or the LEADer, or for contact information for any BEST member, contact:

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## The LEADer Is Online

This issue and all back issues of the LEADer are available online at <http://www.cgin.coop/leader>. You'll need to log in to the CGIN site. Then enter your co-op's LEADer access code. Check with your co-op's NCGA-designated representative for details if needed



**Let Us Know. . .** if or when you have new directors, or if any directors no longer want to receive the LEADer. Send names to be removed and the full names and e-mail addresses of those to add to Karen Zimbelman at [kz@ncga.coop](mailto:kz@ncga.coop).

# Retreats Are Many-Splendored Things

by Marcia Shaw

**Retreat (v).** *To withdraw, to back off or distance oneself (especially from something difficult) for the purpose of study, refreshment or renewal.*

Many boards (and management teams) go on retreat once or twice a year to get away from normal day-to-day business and to focus on something different or broader. If your board members have taken a retreat—whether for fun, to get to know one another, or to prepare for a difficult decision—you probably did something different than you do at your normal board meetings. Retreats can take a variety of formats, but they are most productive when they give the board a creative jolt and sense of accomplishment. Let's look at the elements of a successful retreat.

## **Purpose**

Some retreats focus on interpersonal relationships and help-

ing board members learn about each other. At other retreats, the board focuses on a difficult decision or learns about a new topic. Some boards regularly hold planning retreats to discuss their co-ops' future and direction. Whatever your intent, be sure to build agreement about what you want to accomplish at your retreat. Your goals for your retreat will greatly influence how you plan your time and will be vital to planning the agenda, materials, and logistics.

## **Packet**

Once you understand what you're trying to accomplish, identify materials that board members should review ahead of time or have with them at the

retreat. A retreat packet should include the agenda, materials to read or review in advance, questionnaires or summaries about work to date, and information on all logistical details. Be sure to include directions and what to bring (Towels? Budget reports? A laptop?). If the site is new to directors, include some photos or a description from someone who has been there.

## **Place**

For a change of atmosphere and dynamics, boards typically hold retreats away from their normal meeting sites. Spending an overnight together, if directors are willing and able to do so, offers significant advantages.

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## Retreats Are Many-Splendored Things

Continued from Page 3

Being away from normal routines makes people more open to new experiences and new ways of thinking. And spending more time together obviously lets directors do things they normally wouldn't do with one another, such as cooking, playing games, and hiking. If your board has never held a retreat before, consider starting small, such as an in-town, all-day weekend meeting.

### Food!

Meals will enhance the retreat experience. You might take along a staff person to cook, buy meals from a local restaurant or caterer, or have directors prepare meals in teams. Quality, healthful meals will enhance your time with one another and help everyone be more focused and productive.

### Play Together

Whatever you do and wherever you go, plan to have some fun. Volunteer board members deserve a little playtime. Play cards, board games, croquet, or charades. Make music or ski—whatever suits your group's interests. Having a little fun with one another will solidify working relationships.

### Keep It Fresh

A good retreat doesn't have to have the same content every year. If you traditionally set aside retreat time for planning discussions, include some team building on this year's agenda.

If your retreats normally focus on fun and team building, use this year's session to discuss a big topic. Or use retreat time as a board study session to familiarize everyone with key issues or trends. Spending quality time together as a board will pay big dividends when it comes time to make difficult decisions or deal with challenges.

### Hire a Facilitator

Having a professional facilitate the retreat ensures that all board members can participate fully. A facilitator also ensures a fair hearing for differing perspectives and can help directors have a difficult conversation. Have the facilitator help plan the

agenda and clarify the outcomes you want from the retreat. If you decide against hiring a facilitator, at least have different board members lead different parts of the retreat.

### Take It Home

Use part of your retreat to plan how to integrate your key outcomes or decisions into your ongoing board work. What will be different at board meetings because of your work at the retreat? Great retreat work can be lost if follow-up is a rushed ten minutes or takes place in the van on the way home. Make sure that your accomplishments and ideas end up on the board calendar for ongoing focus and attention.

## Planning Your Retreat Agenda

*In planning your retreat agenda, determine two types of objectives: rational and experiential.*

*Rational objectives involve accomplishments. Examples might include "establishing board development goals for the coming year" or "building our skills in conflict resolution and cooperative decision making." You may have several rational objectives for one retreat, but be careful not to overload—less is often more.*

*Then there are the experiential objectives. These are about how you want people to experience their time together—what will make the day comfortable, easy, or fun? When I think about experiential objectives, I think about the timing of snacks and breaks. I think about how people are most brainy in the morning and get sleepy right after lunch. Keep your retreat fresh through a mix of small- and large-group activities. Breaks, snacks, and downtime will help keep everyone engaged and keep the group's energy flowing.*

*To keep discussions and outcomes on track, involve an outside facilitator in retreat planning, as well as in running the meeting. With good planning and design, retreats can be fun, energizing, and informative.*

by Holly O'Neil



# Planning the Board Retreat

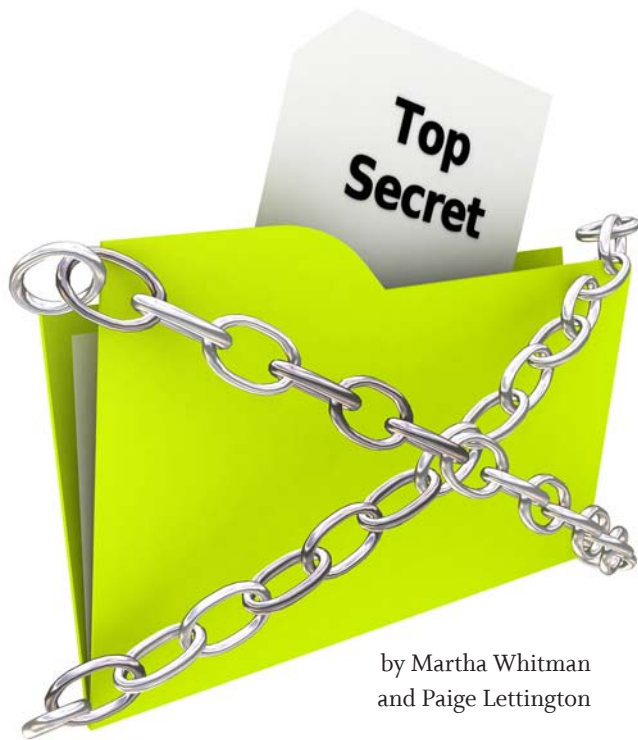
by Michele Adams

## Retreat Planning Checklist

Getting started is probably the most important step in planning the board retreat. Set a date at least six months in advance and make sure that all board members can attend.

Either the board or a subcommittee of the board can work on the logistics of the actual meeting. That said, the success of the board retreat is up to the full board. Make sure to set a clear purpose, prepare a full and significant agenda, and plan all the details. When done right, a retreat can provide for the fullest and most productive decisions of the year.

- ❑ **Set a clear purpose.** What are we trying to accomplish? Will the monthly board meeting happen at the retreat or just “special” business?
- ❑ **Establish dates and times.** The length of the retreat will be determined by its purpose. Be sure to allow plenty of time for fun.
- ❑ **Prepare the agenda.** How will we use our time? Who will facilitate? Who will set the agenda: The board as a whole? The executive committee? The board president?
- ❑ **Research costs.** Create a budget for the location, food, travel, and outside facilitator.
- ❑ **Reserve a location.** Make sure the facilities and space match your purpose. Will you be in town or out of town? Will participants have WiFi and cell phone reception?
- ❑ **Plan meals.** Will you need to accommodate any special food needs? Who will prepare meals? Don’t forget healthy snacks, as well as coffee, tea, and other beverages.
- ❑ **Make travel arrangements.** Will directors carpool or will the co-op provide transportation?
- ❑ **Plan for fun.** Bring along movies, cards, games, and sporting equipment or arrange for nearby activities (such as bowling or boating).
- ❑ **Make administrative arrangements.** Designate a minutes taker, bring extra copies of important documents (bylaws; recent financials), and bring a lot of newsprint and markers.



by Martha Whitman  
and Paige Lettington

# It Ain't Vegas:

## What Happens at the Retreat *Shouldn't Stay at the Retreat*

While board retreats are often used as learning opportunities and as a way for directors to bond, they also often include a commitment to a project. Whether the goal is long-range visioning, planning a member survey, transitioning to policy governance, or exploring opening a second store, these activities require follow-up after the retreat is over. But board members are usually busy people with other jobs. How can you ensure that the great ideas you come up with at your retreat are moved forward? Here are some guidelines, followed by a real-life example.

### **Maintain the Momentum**

Remember that follow-up starts at the retreat. Include time in the agenda to plan the next steps. Make sure to have a plan before the retreat ends. Your plan should include a description of the project, the purpose

and desired outcomes, a rough timeline, and assignments for those who will handle the tasks.

Who will be responsible for managing the project? The answer will depend on the scope of the project, your co-op's governance structure, and the talents and availability of board members. You might designate the work to the board president, vice president, or new board members. Assigning the work to a committee has many advantages: the committee chair can be responsible for follow-up, the project will benefit from group involvement, and staff and members can participate as appropriate.

No matter who does the follow-up work, schedule regular progress updates for the entire board. Such updates will help keep the project on track and focused. As the project moves forward, regularly evaluate its progress, solicit more board

input, and be willing to rework the timeline or tasks. Be prepared to revisit the project if it's not meeting the need it was created for or if something else becomes a higher priority.

Make sure that new board members learn about the project, how it was conceived, and why it's important. Keep the membership informed as well. Don't wait for the annual meeting. Write a newsletter article or two to let members know what the board is up to.

### **For Example: Finding Out What Members Want**

For several years, Co-op XYZ did not pursue any large projects that required board oversight, so the board turned its attention to its strategic plan (purpose, vision, values, and goals). The plan had been developed and approved through a long process, with varying levels of input from members—everything

*Continued on Page 7*



## It Ain't Vegas

Continued from Page 6

from a dedicated working group to focus groups and member ratification—about ten years before.

The plan served the co-op well, but some directors wanted to review it to make sure it was still relevant and supported by members ten years later. Other directors were cautious about starting the long and expensive planning process again, especially since the elements of the plan were universal and long-term.

At its retreat, the board decided to conduct an owner survey to gauge satisfaction with the strategic plan. Rather than incorporating its survey into an upcoming management survey, the board decided to conduct a separate survey. Directors took

this work on mostly themselves. They created an ad hoc committee, developed questions, conducted the survey, tabulated the results, and reported back to the full board and members through board meetings and the newsletter.

The survey confirmed that owners were happy with the existing purpose, vision, values, and goals of the co-op but were interested in seeing more communication from the board. So at its next retreat, the board planned for a series of facilitated sessions where members could provide input on the co-op and its future.

The board will use these sessions to improve member communications and education, and to make changes that owners support. The board expects to take on new projects resulting from these sessions at future retreats.

This example illustrates several principles of good retreat follow-up:

- The board took a general retreat topic related to owner linkage and used retreat time to create an action plan for that topic.
- A committee led by a board member took on the assignment. It built regular updates to the board and owners into its action plan.
- After the retreat, the board was flexible. It modified the plan to suit the co-op's operations.
- New board members got involved in the project. It will likely result in further discussion and action at the next board retreat.

**NCGA · Western Corridor**  
Mark your calendars for this upcoming event

## See You in Portland!

The next Western Corridor regional board training will be held on Saturday, March 27, in Portland, Oregon. Details will be available in early January.



# Try It, You Might Enjoy Melting Ice

by Cindy Owings



*“The best angle from which to approach any problem is the try-angle.”*

—Anonymous

If a pin had dropped on the cabin floor, everyone would have heard the subtle ping of its landing as a loud echo. The dead quiet lay dry in each person’s mouth. Not one person made eye contact with a neighbor. Even though the woodstove fire crackled, filling the space with a welcome heat, the room was ice cold. I wondered, “What could break this frigid silence?”

Our board had very difficult topics to address at this, its annual retreat. We were a long way from feeling comfortable. How would we relax enough to speak our truths? Could each of us voice an individual opinion? Our large circle was feeling increasingly claustrophobic. Have you ever found yourself with these same feelings of fear and dread?

Sometimes it takes a stomp to break the ice in a room—to wake everyone up and break through the discomfort. You might need to stand up and stomp the ground, yell, stand on your head, or wiggle your body to shake off the frost.

Often, an outsider is the best one to break the ice that freezes a group’s ability to communicate. An outside facilitator can draw the best from each participant, even the most shy. Professional facilitators are trained to help individuals come together, solve problems, discuss difficult topics, and reach consensus.

You can also use activities to thaw the frostiness that blankets a group. Such icebreakers can create a positive atmosphere, help people relax, remove social barriers, energize and motivate participants, and encourage people to “think outside the box.” The result is that people feel more comfortable with each other.

It’s true that the easiest approach to problem solving is the “try-angle.” Woody Allen said, “Ninety percent of life is just showing up.” And showing up during a retreat means that everyone feels comfortable enough to participate. That is the essence of the try-angle.

## • Try This!

- Search Google for icebreakers. Check <http://wilderdom.com/games/Icebreakers.html> for ideas.
- Play “Truth, Truth, Lie.” In this game, each person states three things about him- or herself—two truths and one lie. The group has to decide which is which.
- Check out the book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, A Leadership Fable* by Patrick Lencioni.
- Pass out Hershey’s Ice Breakers, little candy morsels with flavor crystals.



# And the Survey Says...

## Tips for Great Board Retreats



by Lucinda Berdon

We surveyed Western Corridor co-ops for ideas on great board retreats. Feedback included:

### When

- At least annually
- A long weekend—Friday through Sunday
- A short weekend—all day Saturday or all day Sunday

### Where

- Out of town—at an affordable ski lodge, hotel, or retreat facility
- In town—at a board member’s home, business, or office (anywhere other than the board’s normal meeting room)
- A place with lots of natural light

### Who

- All board members and the general manager
- A good outside facilitator
- The finance manager or other management staff, as appropriate
- A secretary to record decisions and actions

### How

- With an outside facilitator who can ensure a productive and fun retreat
- With a well-thought-out agenda prepared ahead of time, providing focus for discussion on specific topics and a timeline
- With a balance of serious work and fun
- With a fun exercise or icebreaker to start
- With breaks for hikes, skiing, volleyball, or anything else that gives people a chance to move and interact socially
- With group dinners, including candles, flowers, tablecloths, drinks, and of course great food—prepared either by the co-op’s deli, retreat participants, or a caterer
- With after-dinner sessions, including brainstorming and games

## Check It Out!

### For More Information

The Free Library offers “A User’s Guide to Effective Board Retreats.” Find it online at <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/A+user%27s+guide+to+effective+board+retreats.+%28meetings+of...-a018598656>.



# MEMBER LINKAGE

A LEADer STUDY GUIDE

## BOARD RETREATS

**1. Purpose.** What is the purpose of your retreat? What are your desired outcomes for the issues you will be discussing? What are the desired outcomes in terms of the process or experience you are designing?

**2. Resources and participants.** Given the purpose you've identified, who would be useful to invite to your retreat? The general manager? Other management or staff? A facilitator? Other outside resource people? Key business partners or local business resources? What other resources might be useful in preparing for your retreat? What should all retreat participants read or review in advance? What reference materials should be on hand during the retreat?

*We offer four key questions for your board to discuss and consider in preparing or planning for a board retreat.*

*These questions apply to all retreats, whether they are quarterly or annual, and regardless of their purpose. We hope they help you create a high-powered, energizing, and effective event for all involved.*

# M E M B E R L I N K A G E

## A L E A D E R S T U D Y G U I D E

### NOTES:

**3. Getting it done.** Who will plan the retreat agenda? Who will prepare and distribute the materials? Who will make logistical arrangements? One person doesn't have to carry all the responsibilities, but it's wise to identify coordinators for key segments of the retreat.

**4. Outcomes.** How will your retreat outcomes be integrated into the board's ongoing discussions and work? How will key results be communicated to other co-op stakeholders, including staff and members? Who will make sure the outcomes of discussions get followed up on, inform future decisions, and get communicated as needed?



### Next Issue: **What Makes a Great Board Member?**

## Focus on

Our next issue, on “What makes a great board member?” will come out in spring 2010. What do you look for in assessing board candidates? How do you balance skills, experience, and approaches to achieve a well-rounded board that represents the diversity of your members? How do you assess your board's strengths and weaknesses? Send your thoughts, experiences, ideas, and tips to share to [askthebest@ncga.coop](mailto:askthebest@ncga.coop) or contact Karen Zimbelman ([kz@ncga.coop](mailto:kz@ncga.coop)).