

BY MARY TOMLINSON AND JOHN DREYER

THE 7 DEADLY SINS OF BUSINESS RETREATS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

All too often, the annual business retreat feels more like the yearly visit to the dentist: No one really wants to go, the experience can be painful, and participants are frequently relieved when it's over. All of which undermines the retreat's original goals: time in a relaxing setting, the development of plans without constant distractions, and the strengthening of team relationships.

The culprits are the Seven Deadly Sins of business retreats, which can corrupt a meeting planner's best intentions. If you recognize and counter these demons with solutions for facilitating productive and energizing meetings, you can turn your retreat into a value-enhancing activity.

1 THE FIRST DEADLY SIN, OR, "LOST IN THE SIXTIES SYNDROME." Without a predetermined objective, participants come with their own agendas or, worse yet, none at all. Random issues swirl like dust devils. Futility reigns. Nothing gets accomplished. Having set out without a destination, the meeting becomes a not-so-merry-go-round: It never gets anywhere. **SOLUTION:** Prioritize and determine the key objectives for the retreat. During the months leading up to it, keep a list of what you want to accomplish. Keep the list in order of most-to-least important, realizing that it may remain in a state of flux. Seek input from your managers. Set a date for announcing the objectives. Establish a bar that will measure the retreat's success.

2 THE SECOND DEADLY SIN, OR, "EYES ARE BIGGER THAN THE STOMACH SYNDROME." Too often, the plan is to evaluate last year's performance, have each area give a status report, develop next year's plan, set out the 10-year vision, do team-building exercises before lunch, and play golf in the afternoon. With this approach, participants will either have sky-high expectations that can't possibly be met or will snicker about how management thinks it can stuff 20 pounds of potatoes into a five-pound bag. Discussions wind up being short-circuited.

There is little chance for valuable ideas to emerge. Results end up lacking important input. Worse yet, the cynics' snickers are confirmed, and the optimists are frustrated.

SOLUTION: Reduce unrealistic expectations. If disappointment is the gap between expectation and reality, close the gap. Rome



wasn't built in a day, and business planning requires one step at a time. Subjects worthy of a business retreat are generally large and difficult and require more than a cursory discussion. Choose one to three objectives that can be thoroughly discussed in the time allotted. Allow ample time for determining the next steps and establishing an action timeline. Real discussion that achieves genuine results communicates that participants' opinions really do matter and that the company is willing to commit the time necessary to attain its objectives.

3 THE THIRD DEADLY SIN, OR, "I CAN'T SEE CLEARLY NOW SYNDROME." If participants thought there were here to discuss Operation Hawaii but suddenly the topic is Project Antarctica, your retreat is headed in the wrong direction. When your team isn't sure why it's showing up, some participants may shut down. ▶

You'll see them crossing their arms, slouching in their chairs, rolling their eyes, sighing loudly, and becoming a negative influence. Others are attentive but quiet, hoping to avoid embarrassing themselves. As a result, your organization does not have its A-Game.

SOLUTION: Communicate the topics, objectives, and goals of the retreat well in advance so that participants can come prepared for total involvement with lively discussion and reasoned debate. Even if your retreat is for brainstorming, it will be more productive if the participants have brainstormed in advance. Preparation is the mother of spontaneity. Good ideas come from good foundations. Nothing worth executing has ever sprung from an unprepared mind.

4 THE FOURTH DEADLY SIN, OR, "MY WAY SYNDROME." If the boss is running the discussion, you have a classic case of same old, same old. Participants have an almost Pavlovian response: The ideas and thinking they bottle up in the office stay bottled up in the retreat. With the boss maintaining his or her position as lead dog, participants tend to follow along and offer what they think is the "right" answer rather than the best answer. By repeating the daily office pattern, the chance for surfacing fresh and potentially profitable ideas is greatly reduced.

SOLUTION: The retreat is the perfect opportunity for the boss to fade into the background. Bring in an experienced facilitator. An open conversation in which the boss is just another participant is a much more valuable format for a retreat. Having someone with an outside perspective lead and ask hard questions makes it more likely that the team will delve deeper into discussions and come up with fresh ideas. But even with a facilitator, heed this caveat: The more the boss talks, the less everyone else will.

5 THE FIFTH DEADLY SIN, OR, "THE BOSS ASSUMETH TOO MUCH SYNDROME." Executives wouldn't be having this retreat if they already knew what the participants were thinking about the topics being put up for discussion. It is more than likely you don't know all you need to know about the opinions and interpersonal dy-

namics at work among members of your group. Participants carry their uncharted pecking orders and office-politics baggage to retreats, which means you are going to get the same power plays off-site as you have at your daily work location. Unless you change more than the geography of the meeting, you run a serious risk of not having all of your executives' best thinking articulated.

SOLUTION: Work with an objective third party to develop a pre-retreat survey which gives all participants an equal voice, assures that all ideas are aired, and identifies what participants see as drawbacks or key issues and what they hope will come out of the meeting. Armed with these pre-retreat survey results, the retreat can be customized to deal with the real issues, which may have been invisible to the boss.

6 THE SIXTH DEADLY SIN, OR, "POLLYANNA SYNDROME." Fireworks typically fly among the more dynamic personalities who are firmly committed to their own ideas. Others around the table size up the battle and begin thinking about whom to back. Out of the corners of their eyes, some look for body language from the boss. The boss typically does not want to embarrass star performers, so he or she takes off the boss's hat and puts on the peacekeeping beret. Compromises seem to have been struck on key issues. And everyone thinks decisions have been made, only to wonder later what they were.

SOLUTION: Go into the meeting hoping that the fireworks will fly. It's a sure sign there is passion and creative energy in the room. Be prepared to deal with them. Know your topics well enough to recognize which ones will generate strong and differing opinions among your executives. This is where facilitators earn their money, keeping the discussion going and under control. One method a facilitator might employ is to discuss the hot topic alone with the boss and another top executive prior to the retreat. The game plan: Each top executive takes an opposite position, even if they personally hold the same one; like playing devil's advocate. The facilitator has

each state his/her position to begin the discussion and then asks each of the others at the table to weigh in. While the strong personalities will say what they think regardless of the method, the others are more likely to be candid in this scenario, and the company stands to benefit from candid thinking.

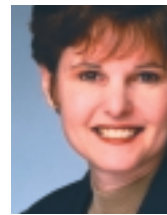
7 THE SEVENTH DEADLY SIN, OR, "CORPORATE ALZHEIMER'S SYNDROME."

The deadliest sin of company retreats is that there is frequently no follow-up. It's as if the retreat never happened. No memos are issued to summarize the decisions made and the next steps to be taken. No periodic checkups are made on the progress of action items. Bottom line: The company wasted time and money, missed out on growth opportunities, and sent a deflationary message to the participants.

SOLUTION: Remember, the end of the retreat is really a beginning. A successful planning retreat serves as a medium that produces concepts, teambuilding, innovation, new products, and growth long after everyone has gone home. Before the retreat ends, state the next steps clearly, assign projects, and determine the follow-up timetable. Establish a communication plan for posting the progress of initiatives that have been put into place.

Avoid the Seven Deadly Sins by defining firm objectives, stating clear expectations, establishing open communication, and performing consistent follow-up. ■

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