

Riding the Retreat High

A leadership retreat is a happy little bubble. But what happens after the bubble bursts?

by Laura Villacrusis-Weaver in collaboration with Rosie Steeves

Does this sound familiar? Despite the new five-pound binder in your bag, you return home from the company's leadership retreat feeling positively buoyant. A metaphorical weight has been lifted, weight you'd been carrying around so long you'd almost forgotten it was there. In its place you've put enlightening insights into great leadership, and uplifting revelations about yourself, your colleagues and your organization. You can't wait to get back to the office and see what a difference your new perspective will make. But when you do, you realize the only thing that's different at work is you. You can almost hear the air going out of the balloon, can't you?

There's a natural high that comes with a successful retreat. Many of us have experienced it at some point, along with the subsequent deflated feeling when reality outside the retreat hits us again. As valuable as leadership retreats can be, they're essentially happy little bubbles. It's what happens after the bubble bursts that really counts. The question is how do you continue on your development path and put your new skills to work once you're back in the real world? How do you keep riding that retreat high?

In their article "Leadership is a Contact Sport" (*Strategy + Business*, September 2004), Marshall Goldsmith and Howard Morgan reviewed development programs in eight major corporations, tracking participants' leadership effectiveness over time. When it came to participants who maintained long-term achievement, the authors found the constants were followup activities and ongoing interaction with other leaders. Like in that child's game where you never let the balloon touch the ground, successful participants kept their development high going by helping each other stay afloat.



A year and a half ago, The Refinery held a four-day workshop in Banff for a group of managers from a leading petroleum company. We connected with one of the managers again recently (we'll call him Joe), and asked him about his leadership journey since the workshop. Joe was happy to report that he had not, in fact, experienced the post-retreat fizzle. "It's been 18 months since Banff, and I'm quite amazed that the positive after-effects are continuing." His secret?

Throughout those 18 months, a small group of managers who participated in the workshop have continued to meet regularly to support one another. Here at The Refinery we call such groups learning circles and know full well how effective they can be. Just ask Joe. "I believe that everyone in the group has experienced personal growth as a result of our ongoing contact with each other," he told us. "There is a desire to carry on, to continue learning about ourselves." Learning circles like Joe's are just one way to build on the momentum of a leadership retreat. Activities such as executive and peer coaching, and inter-session learning activities that focus on specific content areas are other post-retreat activities we use at The Refinery.

Whatever the format, the objective of any successful follow-up program is to provide opportunity for continued and purposeful connection with fellow developing leaders.

Meeting with Joe's group in March, we saw firsthand how that connection has helped them retain the energy and momentum of that first workshop. By committing to working through their development together, these managers have essentially recreated the environment they found so valuable in Banff. "I find that I can draw upon the learnings from the group to improve my effectiveness as a leader," Joe said. "When I mess up, or when I'm struggling with a particular situation, I know I can bring the issue to the group. A couple of times, just knowing that the group is there if I need it has actually allowed me to resolve leadership issues on my own. That's empowering."

So the next time you're unpacking that five-pound binder after a leadership retreat, think about how you can continue learning with your colleagues. Take advantage of the follow-up work that's organized as a part of the program. And if there isn't a follow-up offered, take the lead and make it happen. Consider it your first step in keeping the balloon intact and afloat.

This article was written Laura Villacrusis-Weaver, an Associate with The Refinery Leadership Partners Inc. in collaboration with Rosie Steeves. Laura can be contacted at laura@refineryleadership.com or visit The Refinery at www.refineryleadership.com

