

Company retreats: Know the rules

by Robert L. Dilenschneider

You've been invited to attend the company retreat in Hilton Head or Aspen. Congratulations. That invitation usually means that the company values you enough to pay a minimum of \$200 a day for you to learn teamwork, embrace the organization's new vision or brainstorm about a marketing problem. However, beware. During corporate retreats careers are made and destroyed.

Retreats, just like all other corporate rituals — such as the office Christmas party, presenting a proposal to the board of directors or asking for a raise — reflect the rules of the corporate culture. Break the rules, and you will suffer. Observe the rules and you could emerge a star.

When writer Mary Jane Genova was just a few months into her first corporate job at a staid petroleum company, she was invited to attend a public-affairs retreat. She was still clueless to the rules. At the retreat she was too visible — for example, laughing loudly. During her performance review her boss cited her behavior, including the laughing at the retreat. He said she would have to

This organizational ritual about which we're hearing so much now is nothing new. Blue-chip companies frequently held them as bonding exercises and perks. They also served as a rite of passage in which high-potential employees were supposed to strut their stuff — in a way, of course, that fit with the corporate culture.

What is new is how ubiquitous retreats have become. Even small businesses with fewer than 20 employees, such as Ceavco Audio Visual Co.,

retreats also give the impression that the organization is trying to deal head-on with its problems and opportunities. They're a major public-relations tool — and help build morale. Corporate history is frequently dated from the time of the retreat. "At the retreat in Seattle," you'll hear employees say, "We launched our customer-focus

what has gone on during previous retreats. Here you have to tap into the company grapevine. That's what Genova should have done. Determine what rules of the corporate culture seem to be operating at your company's retreats. How should you dress? Maybe retreats at your company are the one time when superiors and subordinates can fraternize as equals. If that's the case and you remain highly

unique access to the powers that be.

► Find ways to let off steam safely. Maybe that means calling your significant other three times a day or getting up at 5 a.m. and jogging. You're responsible for keeping yourself under control.

► Accept the fact that confidentiality doesn't really exist, at least not at retreats. As soon as my colleagues and I returned from a retreat, the office was buzzing about what various people there allegedly had said. It is commonplace to "bring" the retreat and all that transpired there back home. Superiors, subordinates and peers are all eagerly waiting for the dirt. Here you must be careful. If you reveal too much information about the retreat, you could be seen as indiscreet. If you say too little, you could be seen as stiff. Before you go home, prepare in your mind your spin on the retreat.

► If you've made mistakes at the retreat, create strategies for damage control. For example, you let your colleagues at the retreat know that John in marketing made a weak presentation there. John is now gunning for you, and you need his cooperation on an upcoming project. You can apologize to John, saying that you were having a bad day. You can offer him resources for his future presentations. You can plant in the grapevine that John, despite any rhetorical weaknesses, has powerful strengths and could be the next CEO.

And make sure you're invited to the next retreat, no matter how awful they are or how busy you are. Retreats partly exist to showcase the strong players in the organization. It's only common sense that you want to be seen among them.

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By Sam Ward, USA TODAY

hold them. According to Teiry Furman, president of Group Planning Specialists, which conducts retreats, the number of retreats held has increased about 30% over the past five years. She attributes the increase to companies' recognition that if you get people out of the office and put them in novel surroundings, you're more apt to get their attention.

In a volatile global economy, retreats are also one way of ensuring that the same message gets out to the main decision makers in the company. Thereafter, so the thinking goes, everyone will be singing from the same hymnbook. In addition, re-

strategy."

Perhaps the most important benefit of retreats is that they can improve teamwork. Getting together in a nice place outside the office, playing golf with each other and participating in team-building exercises can help people get to know each other and cooperate better. However, retreats are generally thin on other results. But that doesn't mean you should be openly critical of retreats or lament the fact that you're leaving so much important work at the office. Here are guidelines for how to conduct yourself before, during and after retreats:

► Before going, research

deferential to your boss during the retreat, you'll be perceived as out of touch. Maybe the rules of the corporate culture are to participate enthusiastically in athletic events. If you stay on the bench, you risk being perceived as not exactly a team player. The presentations you give should be short and entertaining or perhaps heavy and charismatic; if you miss the mark you'll lose points.

► Be a good sport. The creativity and bonding exercises at the retreat may seem crazy. But go along and don't let your comments or body language indicate your reservations. Suffer fools gladly. Look at it this way: It's only three days of your life. And you're getting

deem herself at the next year's retreat. Genova was unlearned and never quite became comfortable in corporate life. She's now self-employed.

On the other hand, there are those who have blossomed at a retreat. During the early 1980s, Roger Smith, chief executive officer of M, gave a sensational speech at a retreat. Many of the troops returned home saying all knew then who the leader was.