

Renewing Yourself and your Career —A Formula for a Personal Retreat



Traditions of Renewal

Some cultures have traditions of personal renewal. Aborigines “walk about” the outback for months at a time. American Indians pursue the ritualistic vision quest. Eastern mystics practice yoga or meditation. Western devotees pray. Sportsmen hunt or fish. Runners marathon. Women spa. Many golf. More drink.

Business executives have no tradition for renewal. Although many have discovered ways to relax or gain perspective, they don’t have time-tested traditions or ritual. Executives need a way to rekindle their unique spark ... to listen deeply to their inner voice of inspiration. Vacations too often involve distraction and social obligation. Corporate retreats are too focused on external issues such as customers, numbers and problems. The weekly golf game is too short.

Some executives are forging a new tradition—the personal retreat. They are experimenting with ways to escape the stress of running a business, to recreate the conditions that ignite their fire, insight, creativity, perspective, and courage. They are taking their nose off the grindstone and putting it, well, in places that are deeply personal and renewing.

Why Retreat?

Look at your calendar for the past month—meetings, trips, dinners, trade shows, calls, obligations. Now look at your email. How many a day? And how many phone calls must you make to get to the bottom of the list? The bottom? Indeed.

Overwhelm is not the only reason the executive needs a retreat. There is also inertia. Anything in motion tends to stay in motion. Moving, talking, asserting, deciding, budgeting, worrying, firefighting, traveling, planning, hiring, firing, compensating, managing, leading and expediting. Whew.

Most dangerous is the *tyranny of familiarity*—the same office, the same chair, the same faces, the same routines, the same product. Sameness dulls the senses. It also creates the illusion of safety. How often have you been jolted to reality by an unexpected financial report, a lost customer, or a quitting employee, and said: “I should have seen this coming?” It’s hard to see reality, even if it is staring you in the face or shouting in your ear, if your world is too familiar.

Executives must stay sharp to remain effective and competitive, but too often become overwhelmed, stuck, or too comfortable. Something needs to be shaken loose. A catalyst must be introduced. The conditions must be right.

Conditions for a Retreat

Whether a cabin in the woods, a sail around the world, or literally a long walk, some conditions lead to better results. Here are some suggestions, based on my experience of 10 years of annual retreats:

- *The setting is unfamiliar; routines are changed*—I can't do a retreat at home or work. Neutral ground is essential. Previous locations include a beach condo, a cabin in a state park, a tent in the woods, and a room at a remote retreat center.
- *The environment is nurturing to you, free of discomfort*—I once did a vision quest in the deep woods, in the cold rain, confined to a 12-foot circle, with only a gallon of water for sustenance. It was a profound experience, but most of the time I opt for comfort. Also, there is something about nature that frees my creative thinking and nurtures my soul, so I generally opt for woods or water.
- *Distractions are minimized; obligations are set aside*—Don't bring paperwork or your watch. Leave your phone at home, or only use it for outbound calls to spouse or close friends. Clean up pressing obligations before you go.
- *A minimum of three days*—I need a minimum of one day to rest/sleep, one or two days to ponder, and a day to integrate my insights. If anything, it takes a day or two to get used to the idea that you don't *have to be* anywhere or *do* anything!
- *No people are around*—Since I'm introverted I get energy from solitude, so this is easy for me. Extroverts, on the other hand, gain energy from socializing but still need periodic time alone with their thoughts. Population density is one of society's great stressors; 100 million years of human evolution did not prepare us for crowded freeways and cramped offices.
- *Have an instrument to record your insights*—My favorite is a couple 3x5 cards and a pen in my pocket. Recently I had a laptop and internet access. Most important is to record your ideas, especially those that may come when you are experiencing feelings that inevitably arise during a retreat (more later).

Preparation

A head start prepares your mind and spirit. You can start the process percolating a few weeks ahead by using these techniques:

- *Affirm your openness*—Be willing to accept whatever insights or decisions emerge. It sounds corny, but make an affirmation out loud to yourself. This could be a prayer if you are so inclined, or it could be a sincere proclamation in your own words: "I am open to whatever truth or insight comes to me, no matter how scary or life-changing." Personally I'm not superstitious or very religious, but I simply find that this helps.

- *Start two lists*—One list is headed “Reality” and the other “My Talents”. The first list is an *honest* appraisal of what is happening in your job and your life. Be candid about finances, relationships, and your personal state of mind. Pretend that you are replaced in your job by an accomplished pro; what changes would they make? What would your loved ones say about your health and happiness? The second list is a brainstorm of the things that you’ve always done well or loved doing, going all the way back to childhood. Pay special attention to your unique gifts, and activities that you naturally gravitate towards. The purpose of this second list is to remind yourself not to throw the baby out with the bath as you make future changes.
- *Discuss your retreat with your spouse or a friend*—One benefit of talking to people who care about you is that you may get a valuable reality-check. This is especially true if you tend to be too busy to listen, or stubborn (classic executive traits). Another benefit is that your mind will start to formulate a focused question or issue to address during your retreat. You might choose to start journaling your goals a few weeks ahead of time.
- *Pack inspirational materials*—Bring a great book or articles on leadership. Pack a video/cd of great people doing great things. Bring along your journals or notes from previous retreats or life-changing experiences.

The Retreat Process

Your ideal process may be different from mine, or others’. It will change from time to time. And should. Here are a few suggestions to help you design a good experience:

- *Rest*—Sleep whenever you get tired. You may stay up until 3 in the morning with a creative burst, but then nap whenever it pleases you. Most people are clearest and most creative when they’re rested. If you arrive in a burnt-out state, it may take a couple days to regain your balance.
- *Exercise*—If you typically exercise, keep it up. If you don’t exercise, at least take walks. Your mental clarity and emotional health are best when your body is active.
- *Eat and drink whatever you damn please*—A retreat is a time to escape obligations and be self-indulgent, out of the judgmental eye of friends and family. It’s a time to follow intuition and urges. However, beware that food and alcohol can dull the mind and emotions. Personally, I have learned to indulge myself in a healthy way. So I’ll eat smoked salmon three times a day, bring my own Starbucks, and limit myself to a single Guinness. Over time, my interest in alcohol and junk food has waned. It’s more enjoyable to be clear-headed, indulging an exciting business idea while walking through crunching leaves.
- *Change your perspective*—Creativity flows when I change my habitual perspective. There are many kinds of perspective, centered on the 5 senses: sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. For example, visual perspective can change by being in a beautiful place, such as woods or beach. Sound can change with silence, or new music. Touch can change by indulging in a mud bath, hot tub or massage. Taste can change by sampling exotic foods. Smell can change with

salt air or musty wood floors in a cabin. Importantly, you can amplify these changes by creatively exploring each channel in depth, i.e., making a photography study, or scuba diving.

- *Embrace uncomfortable feelings*—This is foreign territory for many executives, especially men. The fact remains that we are feeling creatures. And we often ignore feelings in our day-to-day preoccupation with thinking. Uncomfortable feelings get stuffed and build. These include frustration (a mild form of anger), worry (mild fear), guilt and sadness. Feelings tend to let loose once we relax. So whenever I go on a retreat, I have come to expect a flood of feelings. In fact, I encourage them, no matter how uncomfortable. You don't need a therapist to do this, but it takes a conscious effort. During the retreat, once you are rested, watch for signs of discomfort. This often is disguised by judgment about people, or annoyance with anything. If you can identify emotion, try to amplify it until it grows. Just sit there and feel it; don't avoid it by distracting yourself. Yell or cry if you want. Soon it will diminish, and you will feel remarkably renewed. Don't ask why or how. I do it because it works.
- *See films*—Long ago in film class I learned the distinction between movies and film. A movie is entertainment, while a film stirs something deep in the intellect or soul. If possible, see films during your retreat, especially those that move you. Film provides a condensed, intense change of perspective and emotional charge. For those of you who know John Gray's work, *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus*, the virtues of chick-flicks and guy-flicks are evident.

Integration

Too soon it will be time to go home. Reality will slap you in the face, and you will get swept away by forces outside your control. Before you leave your retreat, distill your insights and write a simple action plan. Beware of over-commitment, unless your staff has sufficient talent and capacity.

I find it helpful to “go public” with my plan. There is nothing like accountability to feed the energy of a business. I always ask my staff (and spouse and TEC group) to reality-check my plan, but I am wary of people's tendency to distort my vision with their vision, or their fears. Yes I care about their input, and I am a “servant leader”, but I can only be in service to others when I first honor my own vision.

Try to make the retreat an annual ritual. Link it to an event, perhaps your birthday. If you wait until you think you need it, for example when you get burnt out or stale, your job and relationships are already suffering.

Remember that you are unique. You can't just follow the rules set by the masses—you must make your own rules. You must look inside yourself to bring out the brilliance, perspective and courage that have always set you apart from the crowd.