

## MANAGING

# Not Just A Meeting; It's An Adventure

By Cynthia Scanlon

Since 1970, the law firm of Snell & Wilmer has held retreats for its employees to discuss topics such as corporate law or alternative dispute resolution. The retreats, like those of many other companies, usually involve an afternoon of intensive seminars and meetings. They're educational, to be sure, but also pretty sedentary.

Last summer, however, the firm decided to try a new twist. It gathered a group of about 50 lawyers from its offices in Salt Lake City, Phoenix, and Irvine, Calif., for a wilderness retreat outside Tucson, Ariz. The lawyers spent the afternoon doing a series of team-building exercises; in one, for example, eight people on a single pair of long skis had to walk through a slalom course.

"Everyone had to pick up their right leg at the same time and then their left leg," says James Condo, coordinator for Snell & Wilmer's commercial-litigation group. "We learned to rely on each other and work together to bring our individual talents to the team to solve a problem."

The concept of team building through this kind of retreat—which may include adventure games, water rafting, rock climbing, unconventional brainstorming sessions, and countless other possibilities—has been around for years, but it is gaining in popularity among small firms such as Snell & Wilmer, according to companies that organize such retreats. They say that small-business owners and managers are recognizing that giving employees a hands-on experience can help build cohesiveness within the company.

"Retreats can create a shared history for people," says Matt Weinstein, founder of Playfair, Inc., a Berkeley, Calif., company that specializes in team-building events for retreats and meetings. "When employees go back to work, they can relate to each other better because they have had interactive experiences with one another."

Group Planning Specialists Inc., a Seattle-based company that plans retreats and meetings, promotes the importance of getting employees together away from

*Cynthia Scanlon is a free-lance writer in Tempe, Ariz.*



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**Playfair, Inc. founder Matt Weinstein, right, and staff members—from left, Ritch Davidson, Terry Sand, and Fran Solomon—do an exercise developed by the firm in which craft materials are used to design a sculpture representing a company's vision.**

the office, especially in unusual surroundings. It has helped numerous companies build teams through events such as scavenger hunts, sales meetings at museums or mansions, and even a cocktail party at the 19th Green bar at Pebble Beach Golf Club, in California.

"Whether you have 20,000 employees or two employees, interacting is so different outside an office atmosphere," says Teiry Furman, president of Group Planning.

## Charge Of The Retreats

Companies are putting more meetings and retreats together than ever before. According to Meeting Professionals International, a Dallas-based trade association of meeting planners, 1996 will be the strongest year yet in the meeting and convention industry, with 73 percent of companies expected to hold more meetings this year than last. Twenty-eight percent of associations are expected to do the same.

*Wilderness retreats appear to be gaining in popularity among small businesses, which say such getaways help to build cohesiveness.*



Along with adventure weekends or days, computerized multimedia, videoconferencing, and special-effects techniques are expected to be used more widely to give meeting getaways a new and exciting element, according to Meeting Professionals International.

The costs of retreats can vary widely, but Furman estimates the average cost for a one-day retreat at \$100 per employee. That usually includes one meal, retreat activities, and local transportation.

An overnight retreat can run about \$200 per employee, Furman says; the price can skyrocket if a company decides to splurge.

#### **The Net Results**

At Snell & Wilmer's retreat—which was arranged by Wilderness Adventures, of Phoenix—the lawyers' favorite exercise involved a net with various sizes of holes in it. "We had to pass each lawyer through the net, and we couldn't use the same hole [more than once]," says John Bouma, the firm's chairman. "So we had to figure out who would fit through what hole, who could lift whom, all the while remembering not to leave the biggest until last because there would be no one left to help him through."

Adds Condo, "It was an opportunity to put the concepts that we've been working on here at our firm into practice."

A retreat need not be off-site to be successful, however. Strategic Events International, a retreat-planning company in Boston, has used a popular exercise, developed by Playfair, in which a client company's employees are kept on-site and given arts-and-crafts materials—such as balloons, cardboard, felt-tip markers, glue, and Silly Putty—to carry out an unusual assignment.

"People come together to design sculptures of their company's vision," says Ronli Berlinger, manager of client services for Strategic Events International. "The sculptures demonstrate what employees think the company's vision is or where it should be going." Once finished, the sculptures are put on display in a "gallery" at the company to help encourage discussion about the firm among employees.

#### **Cooperation And Survival**

Some companies like to challenge their employees by creating retreats that put them in unusual situations. Last year, Kevin Reilly, vice president of Richardson Electronics, a 600-employee electronic-components and semiconductor firm in LaFox, Ill., took the 21 technical professionals in his division on an outdoor retreat that simulated a plane crash.

The employees were divided into four teams, and each team was given the following scenario: "It's mid-January, and your plane has crashed in the mountains 90 miles from civilization. The supplies you were able to recover include 20 feet of rope, a gallon of water, three candy bars, four matches, a coat, and a blanket. Rank the items in order of importance, and then determine how to survive and be rescued."

Says Reilly: "We run through a survival exercise once a year. You really can't do well in the survival exercise unless you can figure out how to work together. And I believe there is no way to be successful in the long term without being successful with group thinking."

#### **Possible Drawbacks**

Although team building is strongly embraced by companies that believe their bottom line depends on the cohesiveness of their work force, not everyone is a

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complete convert to the adventure concept.

Janice Borovay, president of PEP Enterprises, a Phoenix-based company that plans meetings and conferences for businesses around the world, points out that there can be drawbacks to adventure retreats.

Then he decided to take a chance and spend the time and money to send his entire work force through a wilderness program created by AON Change Management Group & Consulting—then known as Pecos River Learning Center—based in Eden Prairie, Minn.

"We spent one day in an outdoor ropes



**Lawyers from Snell & Wilmer** take part in an exercise during a retreat. Blindfolded participants, helped by sighted "guides," have to move a milk crate containing a can of water—representing radioactive isotopes—from one marked area to another.

"You have a lot of people who are happy they did it when it's over, but the anxiety they go through before the program is difficult," she says. "It can be frightening. People feel overwhelming dread that if they don't climb that telephone pole, they are going to have a problem with the people they work with. They fear that if they don't do it, they will lose their job."

Borovay says that the physical nature of adventure retreats can also be daunting to employees "in their 40s and 50s who have made their careers and might be asking, 'Why am I doing this?'"

### Taking The Plunge

Sometimes, however, a company that was reluctant at first to try team building through a wilderness retreat will go ahead with one and be glad that it did. One such firm is Ceavco Audio Visual Co., in Lakewood, Colo. Ceavco sells, rents, and services television production equipment and audiovisual systems.

In 1987, Ceavco had 18 employees and a president, Jack Emerson, who was concerned that the company was unprepared for change. But Emerson had been hesitant to subscribe to the wilderness-retreat concept for team building.

course, jumping off a cliff with a zip line and climbing poles," says Emerson. "Then we spent one day inside doing a variety of group challenges. The last half day was personal-growth time." Then the employees brought what they learned back to the office.

Over the years, says Emerson, his workers have continued to participate in the AON program, and they meet weekly to keep the "Pecos River spirit" alive.

Since 1987, Ceavco has gone from 18 employees and \$3 million in annual revenues to 37 employees and \$10 million in annual revenues. Emerson partly credits the wilderness-retreat experience for his company's growth.

Hersch Wilson, vice president of AON, says his company is acutely aware of the peer pressure and fear that many employees who take part in a wilderness retreat may experience.

"We set up a culture of choice," says Wilson. "We do everything so that people understand that the task is to go as far as you can."

For some, Wilson says, that may mean simply putting on a harness or placing their hands and feet on the rung of a ladder.

### Asking The Right Questions

Playfair's Weinstein agrees with PEP Enterprises' Borovay that companies need to exercise caution when developing and implementing their retreats.

"Change doesn't happen overnight," he says. "Change is a series of very slow steps that need to be carefully managed and well thought out. You can't throw people into scary situations, especially without consent or advance knowledge."

Experts advise companies thinking about a retreat to set criteria on what they want to accomplish. Team leaders should ask themselves questions such as: What kind of interaction do we want? What level of activities can we all participate in? How can we build a foundation to begin a dialogue that can be carried back to the workplace?

Then all the answers should be written down. "If a company doesn't have written objectives, it is wasting its money," says Group Planning's Furman.

A recent survey by Meeting Professionals International of companies that have held retreats or off-site meetings found that more than half of the respondents said they measure their results against those objectives to track their return on investment.

**A**s the popularity of team-building retreats grows among small businesses, companies that take the time to plan their retreats properly will be way ahead of the game.

Playfair's Weinstein—who has written a book, *Managing to Have Fun*, (Simon & Schuster, \$21) about team building and enjoying work life and the workplace—says that taking employees on a retreat or simply recognizing their contributions to the organization is serious business. "Company managers are starting to realize that if you push people toward an end but you don't support, reward, or recognize them, in the end they will burn out," he says.

Borovay agrees and points out that small companies that create an atmosphere of cooperation up and down the organization through a combination of re-engineering, knowledge-based management, and ongoing teamwork programs will have the most success at attaining the teamwork concept and keeping it alive.

"In a small business, management has more of an influence on the entire company," she says. "The leadership of these companies can continue the feeling of what's been learned in the team-building process" by working on team building every day.

"In that respect, these programs could be very successful," says Borovay. "But it has to be ongoing—that's the key." **NB**