



Annual Retreat: What's It All About?

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I blogged a couple of months ago about our upcoming annual retreat. It is this Thursday, July 1 at the Botanical Garden. Let me say more about why we are doing it, and also give you a sneak preview of what we will be doing later this week.

Getting to Know You. The retreat is an opportunity to know your colleagues. We are a large organization with people spread throughout a sprawling building, and many folks have been hired within the last few years. “Oh, that’s what she does. I had no idea just seeing her in the hallway.” “Wow, that person is incredibly thoughtful.” I have these reactions often as I learn more about folks, especially some of our newer colleagues. The last reaction is one that I have regularly after conversations with faculty and staff—I have had it many times just in working with the planning committee for this event. The School is a community and getting to know one another better will make it a stronger community.

Focus on Good Things that are Happening. I am regularly impressed by the many positive things that are happening at the School. You are doing remarkable work. We spend most of our time focused on the things that need to get done, things that could be improved, and overarching challenges like budget cuts. This retreat is an opportunity to step back and celebrate the many good things you are doing.

Improved Communication. One of our strategic planning priorities is to improve communication and collaboration at the School. In my earlier post about the retreat I mentioned that several colleagues



were experiencing high stress levels and that poor communication was a factor. Some folks interpreted it to mean that the retreat was planned solely as a way to help a few people who were stressed out. That wasn't the message I intended to send—poor communication on my part. Helping stressed-out colleagues may be a good enough reason for holding a retreat, but that was not the only reason for planning this one.

The main reason for focusing on communication at our retreat is to begin improving our interactions with each other and with our clients. Greg Allison and Cindy Lee are co-chairing a committee to implement this strategic priority, and this retreat will introduce principles of communication that they have identified. We will begin practicing how to use them and create momentum for other steps that will be recommended as the committee continues its work. The planning committee has invited Peg Carlson, a former School faculty member, to provide training on selected communication principles during part of the retreat. Maggie and Betsy with Mulberry Tree are responsible for overall facilitation at the retreat. We are lucky to have all of these good folks helping us out.

In addition to communication, a related strategic priority is improved collaboration—the two obviously are interrelated. One piece of collaboration that we will work on at the retreat involves identifying and managing the tension between responsiveness and our capacity. It is really difficult to balance those two things without good communication. People have to feel comfortable raising legitimate issues with one another when asked to do something, which is less likely if they lack the communication skills to do it effectively. People have to understand the ripple effect that their decisions have on many other people. The retreat will give us the chance to begin working on these issues.

This retreat is an opportunity to jump start the important work of the implementation committee on communication and collaboration. It is just a start. We will start working on our skills and the committee will continue their work after the retreat—and you will be encouraged to make suggestions about their work. This retreat is a chance to know one another better, improve our communication skills, and have fun in the process. The Botanical Garden is a lovely setting and the temperature is even supposed to be cooler by Thursday. The food will be good and there are some great door prizes. What more could you want?





Communication Issues Are Everywhere