

RETREAT SITE ECOLOGY

After you have selected a site, consider what you can do to enhance the environment so that it is comfortable and conducive to learning. You will expect your group members to become comfortable enough to be open and expressive. The first step to this is to provide an environment that meets their basic needs, encourages creative thinking, and is comfortable and inviting. Keep in mind that even if you couldn't afford to "go away" from your normal meeting space, you can change the environment so that it signals that something special and different is in store. You may also consider using some of these ideas during your regular meetings or training days.

COMFORTABLE SEATING:

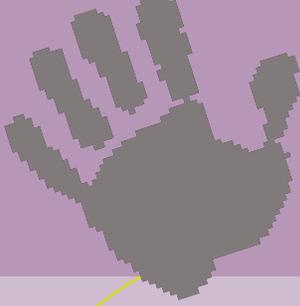
Make sure the meeting space you will be using has comfortable seating (couches, comfy chairs, etc.). Nobody wants to sit in folding chairs or on the floor for a day or a weekend. When a retreat site states: meeting room - go a step further and ask what that means. Perhaps there is a lounge available for your use or you may be able to use the furniture from the lounge in your meeting space. You can even go as far as to have your members bring outdoor chairs, video rockers, blow up furniture, or bean bags. It may sound extreme but you will find that comfort of group members is tied directly to attention span, willingness to participate, and positive attitude.

NO HIDING:

Get out from behind tables and chairs and demand this of your group members as well. It is easy to create a comfort zone when you have a table to hide behind. You will probably need table space for some of your activities, but don't rely solely on this approach. Intermix the opportunity for your members to sit at a table and sit without one. Think about it: when you are sitting at a table, you have the opportunity to doodle, look through your calendar, create a to-do list, even whisper to your neighbor. When you are in a circle with nothing in front of you, you can daydream or focus on the people who are with you. Give it a try and we believe you will notice a difference.

PROGRESSIVE RETREAT:

Try using several different rooms or environments for your retreat. For example: Start your retreat at the breakfast table. Progress to a meeting room area. Then, take everyone outside (rain or shine) and facilitate a discussion or activity in the outdoors. Move back to the meeting room, then the dining area, etc. Use all of your resources and don't exclude any space as an option.



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Decorate the Room:

Ask permission to change the way the room looks ...

- Tape inspirational quotes on the wall
- Create a feedback area (a piece of paper on the wall that is an open invitation for people to write feelings and thoughts about the retreat
- Bring in special guests to further change the tone of the training
- Bring in balloon bundles
- Cover the tables with banner paper and encourage doodling
- Make a change in the room before each new session (after lunch, after dinner, etc.)
- Put toys on the tables (silly putty, play do, markers, bubbles, etc.)
- Have each person decorate their space at the table - have them choose a new seat at each session break and have them add to the decoration left by someone else.
- Put up a welcome sign outside the room
- Hang the goals for the retreat or the specific session in your main meeting room

Refreshments:

You may be thinking, "How do refreshments fall under retreat site ecology?" The basic premise of this ecology thing is shaping an environment that it is comfortable and conducive to learning. Remember, your members are no longer in control of their schedule or their meals. They are counting on you to ensure that their needs are met. Food and beverage are key to happy retreat goers. If they are hungry they will be distracted. Food serves as an energizer and a vehicle for socialization. Go the extra mile and have cold /hot beverages available at all times. Throw candy out on the table and provide a decent snack or meal every 2 1/2 to 3 hours. The first comments on the retreat evaluation will be about facilities and food. Knowing this and acting proactively will mean a strong beginning to productive and happy retreat goers.