

The Retreat Playbook

Oh hey! We're Strive, an events agency specialising in employee events. We plan and run offsites, kick-offs and retreats, so people teams don't have to become event experts overnight. Everything here comes from years of experience and expertise in the employee event space, and we hope it'll take some weight off your shoulders.

What's this: A practical guide to planning a company retreat that delivers on its purpose and still feels like a great few days away.

Who it's for: People leaders, plus anyone who's just been handed "can you sort the offsite?" with six weeks and a slim budget.

When to use: Before you book an event. Ideally, start at least three months out so the objective in section one can steer the venue, agenda and budget.

How to use: Work through it in roughly this order, especially section one. Once everyone agrees what the retreat is for, the rest gets much easier.

1. Set the objective before anything else

Retreats are very often planned backwards, with dates and venue first, an agenda loosely labelled "team bonding", then an inevitable late scramble to decide what people should take away.

The trickier part, in our experience, is that leadership and employees may be quietly planning for two different retreats. Leadership might be thinking, "This is where we rebuild trust after a hard quarter." Whereas employees might be thinking, "Free holiday! Can't wait to explore Berlin with my team." Neither is unreasonable. Leave the gap unspoken, though, and the agenda will wobble between both without serving either.

Before you book anything, get specific about the outcomes:

	Perception / Takeaways (what should people think?)	Emotional Experience (what should people feel?)	Behaviour / Action (what should people do differently afterwards?)
Leadership's intention	e.g. "Leadership listened to last year's feedback"	e.g. Reassured and re-energised about the direction	e.g. Cross-team work on the Q3 roadmap begins within two weeks
What employees may assume	e.g. "This is a reward and a nice break"	e.g. Relaxed and socially recharged	e.g. Day-to-day work carries on as before

Work through the grid and add your own answers. This way you can see and address the gap between these two rows now, rather than *during* the retreat.

2. The do's and don'ts

Agenda & content

- ✓ Protect free time as a real agenda item
- ✗ Don't treat rest as spare capacity, or keep adding content until the connection or reset people came for has been squeezed out

Activities for all

- ✓ Offer a variety of activities for different personalities
- ✗ Don't force your whole team to attend a karaoke night. Let the party animals sing their hearts out while the crafters are down the road enjoying a calm pottery class.

Inclusion & access

- ✓ Build social moments that work without alcohol, and account for accessibility before

the agenda is final

✗ Don't assume one invite and itinerary will work for everyone

Follow-through

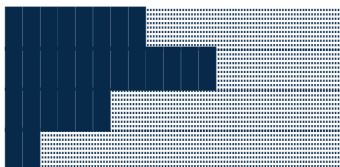
✓ Plan a light re-entry for the following week, and keep the section 1 objectives visible to the agenda team

✗ Don't send everyone straight back to their desks with no follow-through, or let committee planning blur your objectives

3. Building a balanced agenda

Have a look back at your objectives from earlier. These will decide how much of each type of time you need. Please, and we can't say this enough, resist the urge to keep adding sessions until every rest gap disappears.

A rough ratio to start from:

Content		30%
Connection		40%
Downtime		20%
Logistics/Admin		10%

Adjust the mix to match the job your retreat needs to do:

- **Strategic reset / roadmap alignment** – give content more weight while keeping a good amount of connection (40, 30, 20, 10). Content = facilitated strategy workshops and cross-functional working sessions, not passive presentations. Connection stays lighter with shared meals and evening activities.
- **Trust rebuild / morale retreat** – dial content down and turn connection and downtime up (20, 60, 20, 10). Connection = small-group challenges, a shared activity like a cooking class or a tour of the retreat destination. Content, if any, is short and prioritises honesty between your people and leadership.

- **New-team integration** (post-acquisition, big hiring wave) – connection should take the lead, with a bit of content to get everyone aligned (30, 40, 20, 10). Since people don't know each other yet, it needs a little structure. Cooperative group activities work best over anything super competitive, which can feel exposing for people who've just met.

Logistics/Admin is the time taken up by transfers, check-in, session changes and other housekeeping bits and bobs. Most agendas underestimate it, and downtime is usually the first casualty when it overruns.

4. Making the message land in workshops

Workshops are one of the things a retreat can do that a normal work week simply can't: proper thinking time away from a laptop screen, small teams working through something together in the same room, or people getting real 1:1 time with colleagues they usually only see in a Zoom grid.

Before you build one, decide which part of the objective it serves: Perception, Feeling, or Behaviour. Giving each workshop one clear job usually serves that job far better than one slot trying to cover all three.

1. **Open with the "why."** Tell people plainly what the workshop is for. If it's rebuilding trust, say that at the start, so nobody has to guess.
 2. **Match the format to the objective.** Choose the session type that actually serves what you're going for. If you're stuck, we've got a little format guide further on.
 3. **Build the follow-through into the session.** For a Behaviour objective, close by having people name what they'll do and when, while the motivation's still at its peak.
 4. **Use slides for Perception, and participation for everything else.** A deck is great for shifting understanding, but Feeling and Behaviour come alive through discussion and doing.
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5. **Give someone ownership of what comes out of it.** Feedback, commitments, and ideas from a workshop land best when one person is clearly responsible for carrying them past the retreat itself.

5. Keep it fresh: formats beyond presentations

A full day of "someone at the front with slides" is absolutely no one's idea of fun. Choosing the format for the job is super important, and we have some ideas for you:

Format	What it's good for
Fishbowl discussion	Candid discussion. A small inner circle talks while others rotate in
World café	Broad participation. Small groups tackle the same questions, then rotate
Open space/unconference	Ownership and action. People pitch sessions and join the ones they care about
Panel (with real disagreement)	Sharpening perspective, provided the panellists genuinely disagree
Walking sessions	Emotionally loaded conversations. Side-by-side feels less intense than face-to-face

Silent brainstorm → share	Giving quieter thinkers space before the fastest voices take over
Live building/making (like a hackathon)	Collectively making something tangible together in real time.

6. Logistics checklist: travel and venue planning for global teams

Ah, logistics. It may not be the glamorous bit, but it can undo even the best agendas in minutes. Visa issues, travel timings or forgetting dietary needs will quickly destroy all your hard work.

Before booking the venue

- [x] Map travel time and cost from every office or location, not only the one closest to the venue
- [x] Check visa requirements and passport validity for every nationality on the team; flag long lead times early
- [x] Check public holidays and local events that could affect availability, pricing or crowds

Once confirmed

- [x] Add an arrival buffer. Day one should not begin an hour after your longest-haul team lands
 - [x] Arrange airport or station transfers centrally instead of leaving everyone to figure it out
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- [x] Confirm venue accessibility, dietary provision and connectivity, especially if any part of the retreat is tech-heavy
- [x] Sort and document travel insurance, local emergency contacts, currency and expenses

Travel equity

- [x] Compare total travel *burden* (time, overnight stays and jet lag) alongside cost when deciding who travels furthest
- [x] Decide in advance whether to offer extra recovery time to the people travelling furthest, then communicate it clearly

7. Wrap-up: survey, wash-up and retrospective

Now everyone has gone home, and you're packing up the boxes, the retreat is over... right? Nope! You need to collect everyone's opinions on the retreat, employees and leadership, before they forget. We always recommend the following steps.

The employee survey: Keep it under five minutes and send it within 48 hours. Map each question to the three outcomes from section one, rather than relying on a generic satisfaction score:

- Perception: How clearly was the direction of the company communicated during the retreat?
- Feeling: How much did this retreat make you feel the company values you?
- Behaviour: Is there anything you're planning to do differently as a result of this retreat?

General feedback: more about the retreat's execution than its outcomes.

- Which session or workshop stood out most, and why?
- If you could add or remove one thing from the agenda, what would it be?
- How would you rate the communication in the lead-up to the retreat?

Keep it anonymous. If you ask for names, answers won't be as honest.

The internal wash-up: Book a short session with the organising team: plan vs what happened, budget vs actual spend, and any logistical lessons worth capturing before they're forgotten. Worth asking them directly how they found it too, both the planning and the event itself. Organising a retreat is a big job, and it's easy for the people running it to end up too busy to actually enjoy it alongside their colleagues.

The retrospective template: After looking through the employee responses together, take some time to fill in the following columns. Everything you capture now will really aid the next retreat you plan, and help it to be even better than the last.

I like (Things that worked, things that we should fight to keep)	I wish (What didn't work as well & what do you wish was different?)	I wish (Things we could try. I wonder if...?)

We find that the real value of a retreat shows up later: in the decisions, habits and conversations people carry into an ordinary Tuesday six weeks on. We really hope this playbook will help you get more of that.

If all of this feels more than you want to take on alone, that is exactly what we're here for. Strive plans and runs retreats, kick-offs and events for people teams, from first brief



to final debrief. Get in touch, and we'll build it around what your team and your business need.