

THE POWER OF RETREATS: WHERE SPIRIT SHAPES LEADERSHIP

A college friend with a big vision purchased property in her family's homeland region of Galicia in northwestern Spain. The parcel included old stone buildings, and she transformed the area into a wellness and retreat center. She's an accomplished global executive, and I've always known her to possess business savvy with an eye for emerging trends. This was no exception.



**DARREN M.
HENSON**

The global wellness and retreat market had an estimated value of nearly \$184 billion in 2024 and is expected to double in the next decade.¹ Corporate business journals tout the annual executive retreat as a staple in American business culture, and it boomeranged after a two-year pandemic hiatus.² Analysts find that more than 70% of mid- to large-size companies host an annual retreat or off-site meeting designed for key leaders.³

With increasingly remote or hybrid teams, the off-site venue and in-person gathering provide added value. These corporate mainstays typically involve the executive leader gathering the leadership team together for multiday discussion, debate or strategic planning with the intention of creating a shared organizational direction.

Dare I suggest that corporate America ripped these pages straight from the book of religious wisdom traditions? The business world is not alone. Psychology also borrows heavily from the retreat tradition.

Psychologists and therapists call retreats beneficial for restoring the body, breaking the monotony of routines, reconnecting with nature and self, rekindling spiritually and renewing one's sense of self and purpose.⁴ Still, others cite how retreats can favorably impact neuroplasticity and make lasting changes to the brain and its health.⁵

As I scrolled through corporate leadership, psychological and spiritual literature, I discovered remarkable consistency between what busi-

ness and psychology observe about retreats and the definition and aims of ministry formation.

I raise examples from business and psychology because the recent findings from CHA data on senior leadership formation programs indicate that most systems conduct some or all their program modules using a retreat model.⁶ This is good news for several reasons. First, it shows the staying power, if not also the deep hunger, for retreats. The retreat is not only steeped in the spiritual tradition, but it is a common practice among the religious women and men who founded our ministries. They would be very familiar with taking retreats and do so with regularity, annually at least. Second, a retreat is especially conducive to the work and desired outcomes of formation.

As systems consider program enhancements and further development, I encourage and promote the retreat model. It is consistent with our heritage, is invaluable for executive leaders seeking self-understanding, and deepens their experience with ministry and Catholic identity. It provides a useful methodology to the overall intent of formation.

CATHOLIC RETREATS: FROM SPIRITUAL AWAKENING TO DEEPER AWARENESS

A retreat in the Catholic tradition refers to both a place and a spiritual experience. It involves intentional withdrawal with the purpose of prayer, meditation or study by either an individual or group. There are different types of retreats, such as silent or preached retreats with a particular theme or subject matter, and the length can vary from a couple of days to weeks or a month.



Whatever the type, the general purpose is deepening the spiritual life and the search for spiritual illumination, insight or awakening. It is an action

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taken to respond to the spirit of God during one's life in the contemporary world.⁷

Howard Gray, SJ, a Jesuit retreat master in the Ignatian tradition, says that a retreat "is a focused encounter with God that centers on the quality of my personal response to God's self-revelation in prayer and reflection."⁸ The purpose of a retreat is to find guidance and to deepen an appreciation for human life lived with God.

These descriptions of retreat from the Catholic tradition generally cohere with the activities of a formation retreat in Catholic health ministries. The series of retreats that make up the senior leader formation program help participants

to cultivate and assess how they, as leaders, further the work entrusted by the sisters and now sponsors to ensure the ministry flourishes into the future. Just as a spiritual retreat provides guidance to an individual, a formation retreat guides leaders in carrying out their responsibility to uphold the ministry's Catholic identity. While a spiritual retreat can lead to greater spiritual awakening, formation retreat participants commonly report significantly deeper awareness of the importance of our ministries and their own calling in serving and leading the ministry.

RETREAT BENEFITS AND FORMATION METHODOLOGY

In defining formation, CHA highlights that the connections formation makes between personal meaning and organizational purpose then serve to inspire leaders to articulate, integrate and implement the distinctive elements of our Catholic identity for the flourishing of the ministry.⁹

These active steps — to inspire, articulate, integrate and implement — make a critical connection to the discussion on retreats. Leaders must first consider how to integrate the formation

experience into their own leadership practices. Some speak of this in terms of behaviors, yet there's a larger point. It's not just about doing (behaviors), but about being who we fundamentally are as individuals and as leaders. This exemplifies why most formation programs begin with vocation and reflect on how our work is not just a career but a calling from God, who gifts us with the talents and skills we bring to our roles and leadership.

Psychologists find that retreats are ideal settings for the kinds of shifts and personal adaptations we describe in the definition of formation. For example, they note how retreats offer an ideal setting and space for exploration and the possibility of stretching beyond limitations. They describe how a retreat can help new patterns and insights to take root.¹⁰ Furthermore, they explain that retreats provide a "zone of proximal development," referring to a sweet spot between comfort and overwhelming challenge. At the intersection, optimal growth can emerge.

INTEGRATION INTO DAILY LIFE

Another striking similarity between psychological and business literature and ministry formation is an interest in integration. One psychology author describes the art of integration, poignantly noting, "Perhaps the most crucial aspect of any retreat experience lies not in what happens during the retreat itself, but in how the insights and changes are integrated into daily life afterward." She continues, "Successful integration requires understanding that transformation is rarely a linear process. Instead of expecting to maintain a perpetual 'retreat high,' the goal is to weave the essential insights and practices into the fabric of daily life."¹¹

In other words, the disciplines ask questions such as "Does it work?" or "Is it valuable?"

As another author explains, integration "involves processing what happened, making sense of it, and applying the lessons in practical and meaningful ways." It "helps align your external life with the internal transformations that occurred during the retreat."¹²

These vignettes from psychology reinforce the benefits of the retreat model for formation. The work of integration is supported in formation programs with intentional processes. Some ministries utilize capstone projects, and oth-

ers employ shared reflection report outs. A related, structured process is the action feedback method. This entails a process in which leaders prepare to represent one aspect learned from the retreat and intentionally share it with their teams in the weeks ahead. They plan for it before leaving one retreat and report back to the full group at the subsequent one. Such an integration practice takes time and benefits from the Catholic health ministries' current 17-month average program length.

CREATING CONNECTIONS, WELL-BEING

In addition to integration, retreats create connections with self and others. A business executive stated: "Retreats have been traditionally the only time in the year we got together and saw one another. ... I feel I have a clearer understanding of the strategic goals and ambition of my peers and how we can collaborate better together."¹³ Formation programs do the same. Leaders from one region hear experiences for those in another region. And regional leaders, who may have looked upon the national or system office with skepticism, develop lasting and trusting bonds with system leaders because of their shared experiences in formation retreats.

Lastly, the psychology and counseling literature documents benefits of a sense of self and well-being that flow from a retreat.¹⁴ The Church's wisdom has long held the same. The well-being of the individual is at the heart of a requirement in canon law for clergy, bishops and religious to take a retreat on a regular basis, often stipulated as an annual requirement.¹⁵ While this is not a requirement for lay leaders, perhaps it should be.

The requirement that senior leadership formation programs occur in a retreat setting is a great way to approximate a similar intention. The retreat connects us to our heritage and our ecclesial partners. Catholic health care embraces a seemingly small, yet very impactful, aspect of our identity by promoting and utilizing retreats. They need to be standard for senior leadership formation programs, and regular personal retreats can help deepen executive leaders in their vocation and growth beyond their formation program.

DARREN M. HENSON, PhD, STL, is senior director of ministry formation at the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

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