



*Helping Organizations  
Take the Next Step*

## **Add a New Twist to Your City Council Retreat: Ask the Community, “How are we doing?”**

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**By Dan Whitehurst & Carrie Hays**

Many city councils in western cities now conduct an annual “retreat.” This is typically a full-day session, often offsite, in which the council can talk with the city manager and key staff about long term goals and near term priorities...without the usual press of immediate administrative and land use matters that fill up the typical agenda.

NewLevel Group consultants Carrie Hays and Dan Whitehurst recently facilitated such a planning session for the Town Council of Yountville, California. Mayor Cindy Saucerman and her four council colleagues met at a local resort with Manager Steve Rogers and his department heads to set priorities for the next few years.

Under California’s sunshine law, the Brown Act, these retreats are required to be publicly noticed and there must be accommodation for citizens to observe the discussion and address the council. The Yountville Council took it one step further however; they reserved an hour block of time to have a “Community Conversation.”

### **“Are you talking to me?”**

The Council invited key community spokespersons to come in and give their impressions of how the town government operates – and in particular the town council. The citizens included representatives from various groups with diverse perspectives and whom interact with the town council and staff in a variety of ways: veterans, seniors, ethnic communities, hospitality industry, Chamber of Commerce, and even the opponents of a major city project. The basic questions posed to the citizens were: *How is the town government doing? How is the town council doing?* The idea was not to discuss specific issues, but instead to focus on how the town government operates generally and how it treats citizens. Addressing the *how* of city governance rather than the *what* framed the conversation to encourage a constructive outcome. The question “*How can we*

do better?’ is one the council and the community have a shared stake in answering well.

## The How-To's

Here are some tips you can use at your next city council retreat:

- Meet in a comfortable setting outside of city hall
- Invite diverse representatives (have council members and city manager do the selecting and inviting personally)
- Coach council members to “listen – don’t defend or explain”
- Break into smaller groups to foster full participation and candor
- Have a third party facilitator guide the conversations
- Report out to the larger group and invite further comment
- After the conversations and report-outs, give the council a chance to consider: *Based on what we heard, what should we keep doing/stop doing/start doing?*

By engaging in an open exchange of ideas with community representatives, both the town council and staff can integrate feedback into their strategic and operational planning. Fostering this type of dialogue is the democratic process in action, and can be a meaningful way for city government to stay connected to its constituents.

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**Dan Whitehurst** served as Mayor of Fresno, California for eight years (1977-85) and was a city councilman for two years prior to that. He was President of the Mayors and Councilmembers Department of the League of California Cities and a board member of the National League of Cities. He received the U.S. Conference of Mayors DiNunzio Award for Public-Private Partnerships. He can be reached at (707) 299-9185 or [dwhitehurst@newlevelgroup.com](mailto:dwhitehurst@newlevelgroup.com).