



## WEEKEND WORKOUT » EXECUTIVE RETREATS

Kira Vermond dissects the latest workplace and career trends

## Even hard-nosed CEOs have to chill out

It's lonely at the top for CEOs trying to run multinational businesses without seeming to break a sweat, tie clip or nail. No wonder corporate leaders and entrepreneurs at smaller companies need to periodically get away with others of their own ilk to partake in a little networking, whitewater rafting, early morning yoga and, yes, talking about how it feels to be on top of the world.

Why do it? To talk, listen and learn, says Cameron Herold, founder of BackPocket COO in Vancouver, a serial entrepreneur who spoke at an Entrepreneurs' Organization retreat on the MIT campus earlier this week. Fifty-five CEOs from 10 countries descended on the campus for three days of networking and to share ideas, best practices – and fears.

"Really, there's nobody entrepreneurs can turn to in their company when they're scared, nervous or excited. So there's nothing like a peer network to turn to for advice," he says.

John Izzo, author and founder of Izzo Group in Vancouver, which hosts retreats for CEOs, agrees that getting away with like-minded folk is like a breath of fresh air for executives who always feel they've got to be "on" at work.

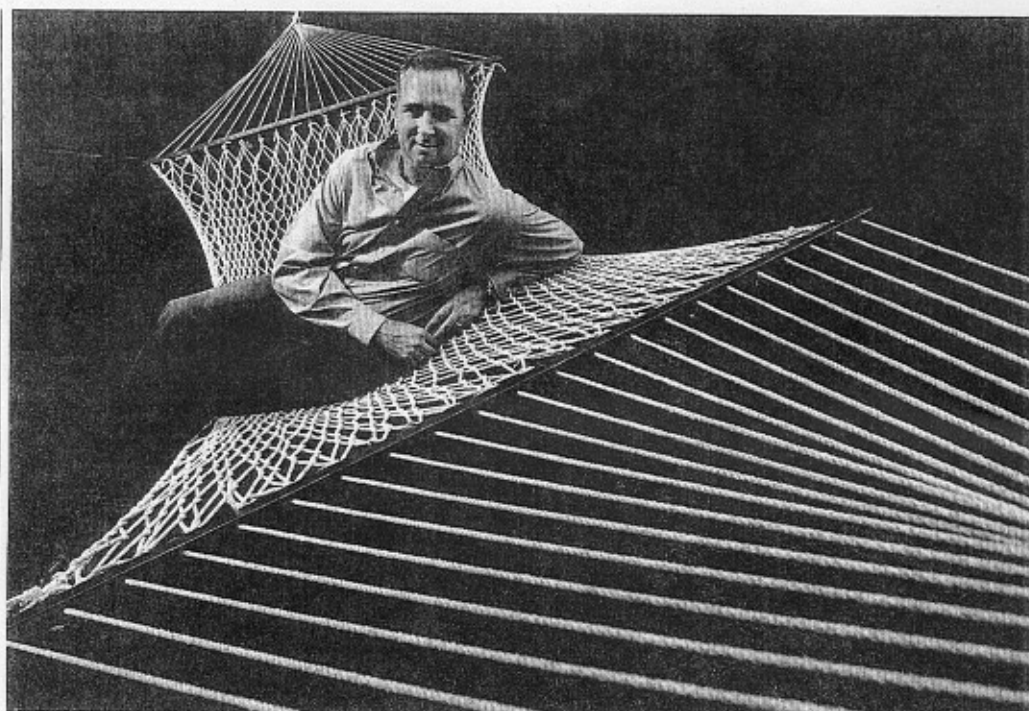
"If the plane is in turbulence, you don't want the captain to come on and say, 'God, I'm scared!'" he says.

But it's all right to admit fear at retreats where entrepreneurs stand up and reveal horror stories from their past year. And these aren't funny anecdotes either, but more along the lines of, "Here's how I almost lost the company one week."

"It really gets all of the entrepreneurs to open up and say, 'You know what? It's okay to make mistakes, be terrified and pour every bit of my personal capital back into the business to turn it around again. They don't feel so alone,'" Mr. Herold says.

The sharing can be raw and unedited, obviously helped along by the fact that most retreats only accept people from dissimilar industries. But there's another benefit of vacationing together with people outside your normal sphere.

"The best breakthroughs come from other people's businesses in other industries instead of being myopic about hanging out only with people in my own industry," says Ya-



Cameron Herold of BackPocket COO runs retreats where executives from different firms can network. DARRYL DYCK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## In the bag

Heading off for a weeklong retreat somewhere warm with 20 other CEOs or entrepreneurs?

## WHAT TO PACK

Two or three pairs of shorts  
Four or five T-shirts  
Sandals  
Sunscreen, bug spray  
Camera and journal  
Business cards

## LEAVE AT HOME

Dress shoes  
Anything even remotely business-casual  
Hair dryer  
Cellphone  
BlackBerry  
Your inhibitions

» Source: The Izzo Group

nik Silver, founder of Maverick Business Adventures in Potomac, Md., who runs an extreme-adventure-type retreat for high-adrenaline CEOs.

## NO SPEED DIAL

No matter what kind of group it is, most have a rule that cellphones have to be off and BlackBerrys tucked away. In fact, at the Costa Rica lodge where Mr. Izzo takes his group of 18, they pay \$2,950 (U.S.), not including airfare, to be signal-free. The silence is golden.

"People in senior positions might have very little time for reflection. They rarely take time to reflect about their role or what they want or where they're going with their own careers and lives – let alone open up to other leaders about the challenges that they face," Mr. Izzo says.

The retreat, the next one running from Jan. 31 to Feb. 7, 2009, is a full week of helping participants reconnect with their passions, mixed in with a smattering of yoga, career coaching sessions, networking and rafting through the rain forest.

And for those who worry

about how their employees will cope if they're away from work for a whole week, Mr. Herold, who takes up to six weeks off each year himself, says relax. Especially if the time away results in a more relaxed, focused chief.

"If you ask most employees if their boss should go away for three days, they'd laugh and say, 'I wish he'd go away for 30,'" he says. "You need to recharge. You need to get away."

Just be sure to buy vacation insurance if you have to bail to deal with an emergency the crew back at the office can't handle.

## PSST! HEAR THE NEWS?

Even though most reputable retreat companies vet applicants before accepting them – Mr. Silver requires executives to fill out an eight-page form before they get the go-ahead – it's still possible you'll be stuck with someone of an insalubrious sort. In short, despite signing a confidentiality agreement, your secrets could get leaked.

"If you share something like, 'I think my CFO is stealing from me,' or 'My business is al-

most bankrupt,' the last thing you want to hear on Tuesday afternoon from your buddy over a beer is, 'Hey, I hear your company is in trouble,'" Mr. Herold says.

"It's somewhat self-policing," admits Mr. Silver, who also requires everyone to sign a confidentiality agreement. "We obviously can't be on top of every single member trying to figure out what they're saying and not saying."

And how about that guy who runs a search engine optimization company who badgers you every three hours over the course of three days to buy his services? Mr. Herold says he's experienced it a few times, but mostly he meets people with whom he'd at least share a coffee.

Mr. Silver says he tries to ensure the people he chooses are not only willing to share and support the others, but will also be fun to hang out with while enjoying a zero-gravity flight in Vegas, surfing in Baja Mexico or mountain biking in the Rockies.

"It's a little subjective, but you can't have a big ego," he says.

## THE UPSIDE

**Sometimes a perspective from someone else's world, will be really meaningful in your world.**

Merge Gupta-Sunderji, principal of leadership training consultancy mergespeaks Inc. in Calgary

## THE DOWNSIDE

**If you have a group where they don't really follow a strict protocol of confidence, stuff could leak out.**

Cameron Herold, founder of BackPocket COO in Vancouver