It is not uncommon for the “grown-ups” in the organization to have a “jolly” in a fine country hotel. These arrangements are more likely to be described as “the off-site board meeting,” the “annual strategy weekend” or the “director’s workshop.”

They can take many forms. In bull markets, they may take place abroad. Partners may be invited, though they have their own, supposedly very different program. In bear markets, the five-star country hotel – out of season, hopefully with a golf course – near to headquarters must suffice.

What happens at these meetings? Why do they occur “off-site?” Can they in any way justify the high cost, whatever the market? These weekends can take many different forms, of course. Some are facilitated by consultants; some have a more playful fun-and-games aspect than others. Some have a balanced work–play agenda, whilst others involve nothing but work. So, what goes on?

There are some common themes. The aim is to analyze the business and the strategy, and to get commitment and “buy in.” Some groups rely on simple but effective SWOT analyses whereby they work out where they are, and should be going. Others might try to be a little more experimental or metaphorical, perhaps being given tasks in the hotel garden or pool – “build a bridge, make a raft.” Some split into small groups; alternatively, everyone stays together all the time.

Some groups rely on a coach, counselor or consultant to keep them on track or lead the discussion. Sometimes that person is a process consultant whose job it is to observe how people are relating to each other, their feelings and “leaking,” rather than what they are saying about the business. They do the people dynamic, pointing out often rather uncomfortable truths about how partners/directors appear to loathe, distrust and undermine each other. Some boards prefer to get in experts, motivational speakers or minor gurus (supposedly) to help them understand the business better.

But these weekends can have common goals. They do aim to bring about a shared, agreed and practical way ahead. This involves agreeing a destination, an objective, a hoped-for bright future. This part is usually reasonably conflict-free and can help the mood go nicely upbeat. The analysis
of the current situation is often less pleasing. This can turn into a blame-storming session (hence the coach) when things aren’t going well. The outcome can be a realistic, detailed appraisal of “the state we are in.” This, of course, leaves the gulf between the now and the future: the start and the destination. That is all about the journey, once there is agreement on the distance to be traveled.

Then come the strengths and weaknesses, force-field, opportunities–threats stuff. It’s about listing, prioritizing and, again, agreeing those factors that are going to make the journey possible, even pleasant, and those that are holding back progress. This part is often the most interesting for three reasons. The first is, obviously, agreement on what these forces are. This can surprise, frustrate, even anger participants, as one person’s strengths are another’s weakness. The second is where to invest your energy – reinforcing the strengths or defeating the weaknesses. This is about time, effort and money. That really does wake people up. And the third issue is about individual roles in all of this.

And it is the latter point that partly explains the “off-site luxury hotel” approach. Whilst the ideal picture of the board of directors or partners is one of a harmonious, talented group pulling together and pooling their resources for the betterment of the organization, the reality is often very different. The partners will often be competitive, egocentric and ambitious people, looking out primarily for Number 1.

Offices have territories and distractions. They have, for many people, memories and ghosts. Hotels offer neutral space, and they may have other facilities that help: the gym, the pool and the golf course. But, most of all, late night, “guards down,” alcohol-fuelled conversations in the bar can be very illuminating. Powerful alpha males find personal conversation difficult, however important they may be. Booze, a good coach and silly games might help. Might.

One objective of the meetings is “understanding each other better.” Perhaps, also, better self-understanding. And this partly explains the point of inviting partners/significant others along. These people play two roles: first, to give insight into the accompanied director/managers. The partner and the relationship can give surprising insight into their work behavior – after all, partners are the “life” part in the “work–life balance.” But, second, partners can have powerful influences. Ask directors in a 360-degree exercise who knows them best, and many say “my partner” – and this is not said in jest. To have partners interact, and even form supportive alliances, can be extremely important. It can also backfire. Some don’t have partners,