



How to Build Team Morale With a Positive Year-End Business Review

By Edward A. Jacobson, Ph.D.
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Even in tough markets, successful advisors make time each year progress, their setbacks, and yes, to count their blessings. Take your team through this informal year-end review to get their minds off the negative and refocus them for the new year.

As 2008 draws to a close, you may be making plans for your firm's annual holiday luncheon, dinner, or party. Of course, the difficulties of the last quarter of the year are nevertheless weighing on your mind.

Here's an idea for holding an additional event (at no cost) that celebrates the year's high points, acknowledges the low points, and jump-starts the new year with positive anticipation. It's called an appreciative year-end review, and it's something simple yet valuable you can provide for your team yourself. This article shows you how.

I've been facilitating this type of review with financial planning firms for six years. Each time, people report that they gain:

- insights about the year that's ending
- increased understanding of other group members
- a feeling of greater connection to the group
- support for their wishes and intentions for the coming year

These benefits constitute a sound business case for your team or firm to take time to Savor the blessings of the year and openly acknowledge its challenges, losses, and tragedies. We know that the year wasn't all positive (an understatement these days, in view of the financial events of the last quarter (2008), and we shouldn't pretend otherwise. However, everyone can [learn from the negatives](#), gain perspective by balancing them against the year's positive happenings, and become wiser for reflecting on all of them, in a year-end look-back.

Three rules for conducting reviews

Like most users' guides, this one begins with several warnings:

- **Meet the deadline.** I believe there is a use-by date for this kind of year-end

Poll

Do you take the time at the end of each year to reflect on your accomplishments and failures?

- Yes, it's part of my formal business planning routine.
- I reflect, but I don't write anything down.
- No, but I'd like to try it this year.
- Who has time to reflect in this market?

review. It should be held before Dec. 25 and, if possible, prior to your firm's traditional [holiday event](#). All interest in and motivation for the event will have vanished by Dec. 26. Remember, timing is everything.

- **Devote enough time.** Set aside an hour and a half. You probably won't need more time, and you might use less. Make it a relaxed occasion, not a "meeting".
- **Don't mix business and pleasure.** Do not substitute this activity for your firm's annual lunch, dinner, or party. Like an army, your work associates travel on their stomachs. They rely on their eggnog and other forms of [holiday cheer](#) to keep their morale going. Tip: Conduct the review earlier in the day (or week) that you hold your traditional annual event.

Reviewing success and failure

With those caveats out of the way, here is the step-by-step guide for conducting an appreciative year-end review for your firm (or for your work group, if you're part of a larger firm).

1. **Arrange the setting.** Gather your group in a room that has comfortable and movable chairs. Typically a conference room or training room works fine. Have a flip chart or two available for the next steps.
2. **Construct a time line of notable events of the year.** The chart below shows the three categories to write on the flip-chart page. Ask people to brainstorm notable events of 2008 in the following three categories: (1) community/world events, (2) workplace highlights, and (3) personal highlights. The sample content in the figure shows that the events need not be positive—just notable. And remember the cardinal rule of [brainstorming](#): everyone's right. Remind people that they should resist the urge to "improve" other people's contributions.

Being with community/world events of 2008. This category is intentionally very broad. It can include everything from international or global events (wars, treaties, and the like) to local events (mayoral elections and United Way campaigns). Expect some surprises, because none of us can retain every detail of 12 months of living in our mind.

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When the first category is complete, proceed to workplace highlights of 2008. Again, these may not be all positive. They can pertain to the firm as a whole, a portion of it, or to an individual.

Then comes personal highlights of 2008. Personal events can pertain to staff members themselves, to their family as a whole, or to one of their family members. As above, not all highlights need be positive.

Sample Ideas From a Year-End Brainstorming Session
<p style="text-align: center;">Notable Events of the Year</p> <p>Community/world events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Sub-prime meltdown</i>• <i>Presidential campaign and election</i>• <i>Elected new mayor</i>• <i>U. S. financial crisis continues</i> <p>Workplace highlights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Held three successful client appreciation events</i>• <i>Added 15 new clients; and no clients left us</i>• <i>Hired new planner</i>• <i>Made progress on reducing paper</i> <p>Personal highlights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Daughter's marriage</i>• <i>Home remodel completed</i>• <i>Stay with exercise program (Running 5days/week!)</i>

Source: Jacobson

This three-part exercise usually takes 15 to 20 minutes. It jogs everyone's recollections and provides the context for the storytelling exercise.

3. **Tell stories.** Each person takes a turn telling two types of "positive high-point" stories (one minute for each type of story).
 - "A positive high point of the year for me at work."
 - "A positive high point of the year for me in my personal life."

If the group has seven members or fewer, have each person tell his or her stories to the entire group. With eight or more people, consider doing the storytelling in pairs.

Give each member of the pair two minutes to tell the stories (one minute per high-point story), then have them switch roles. When the storytelling pairs are done, gather again as a group. Have each person briefly tell the group the highlights of each story that he or she heard (not the person’s own story).

You might want to have someone capture the workplace high points and possibly the personal ones on a flip-chart page. If so, just jot down key words (e.g., “birth of first child”, “got promoted”, or “new home”) rather than whole sentences.

4. **Envision the year ahead.** The next step is to use the following scenario to project ahead to a very positive year. “Imagine that 2009 will be a wonderful one for you and for the firm (or work group). What is one fantastic thing that you wish for, for yourself in your work here, and one fantastic thing you wish for in your personal life?”

Give people a couple of minutes to reflect on these questions and jot down their responses. Divide a flip chart page down the middle, and label one column “personal” and the other “work”. Write down key words that people call out after everyone has reflected on the two questions. Participants find this exercise to be meaningful, because people are generally very supportive of each other’s wishes and aspirations for the coming year. (See examples in the table below.)

Looking Forward to Next Year		
“What is one fantastic thing you’re looking forward to in the next year, in your work life and in your personal life?”		
	Home life	Work life
Colleague 1	Competing U.S. Master’s Swimming meets	Growing firm’s AUM
Colleague 2	Taking family on trip to Italy	Becoming firm’s go-to person for CRM software
Colleague 3	Becoming a Big Brother	Taking responsibility for 10 clients

5. **Wrap up.** When everyone is done, simply ask, “How was this appreciative year end review for you?” There are always plenty of positive comments, and a shared feeling of appreciation for having done this year-end review. It’s a great way to achieve closure and to prime the pump for the ensuing holiday luncheon, dinner, or party.

This simple exercise will bring your team together in a way more formal individual performance reviews do not. By sharing the exercise, they'll gain support and perspective; reflecting on one another's good experiences builds positive ties and allows everyone to be uplifted by the accomplishments of the group.

Especially in this difficult economic climate, it's important to help your team reflect on the entire year, not just the last couple of months. Being able to acknowledge the tough times and then accentuating the positive is a great way to clear the air, lighten spirits, and inspire your team to look forward to the new year with enthusiasm and hope.

One of the industry's most appreciated speaker/consultants, Edward A. Jacobson, Ph.D. is author of Appreciative Moments: Stories and Practices for Living and Working Appreciatively. Order the book and find out about Ed's Individual and Group Coaching services at www.EdwardJacobson.com.

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