

Leadership Toolkit

BOARD LEADERSHIP

How well you use members' time at board meetings is one key to developing a cohesive leadership group. Sadly, board meetings themselves are more often part of the problem than part of the solution. They are often tedious, overly-long events that often rotate between boring reports and long-winded diatribes, with little in the way of real discussion or tangible meaning. Here are some ways to make board meetings productive, interesting and supportive of the board's leadership role.

1. Meet only when there is business to accomplish.

If there is no reason to have a meeting, don't meet! Some boards feel that they aren't doing their job if they don't meet ten to twelve months every year. When the meeting time comes round, however, the executive director and/or board chair rack their brains for agenda topics.

- a. The only time to hold a meeting is when discussion is required to prepare for or reach a decision.** When the only business at hand is to update board members on what has happened since the last meeting, a written report (distributed between meetings) will do the job much more efficiently.
- b. In exchange for fewer board meetings, however, board members do have to make a commitment to read the material that is sent to them between meetings.** Make sure that this trade-off is explicitly stated and that the expectation is reinforced by not reviewing all of the written material at the next board meeting.
- c. The Better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Guide recommends meeting at least three times a year, with at least one meeting to be held in person.** Most boards meet at least four times a year – one of which is part of an extended retreat – in order to consider the all the fiduciary matters.

2. Have an agenda with timeframes.

Assign each topic a reasonable amount of time, with “reasonable” being the operative term. Pay attention to how long substantive discussions take and build in enough time in the agenda for these topics. If there are more topics than there is available time, either agree at the start to lengthen the meeting or move one of the issues to the next meeting.

a. The meeting leader should adhere to the timeframes for the agenda.

If a discussion runs over, point this out to the group and, if necessary, negotiate a specific amount of time for continued discussion. As an alternative, suggest that another agenda item be tabled until the next meeting to accommodate the current lengthy discussion.

b. The agenda should be made available to people in advance of the board meeting so they can prepare for the discussions. Not having the agenda in advance or bringing up matters at the last minute for a vote, often means there isn't enough time for board members to be comfortable with what is being proposed.

3. Make meeting agreements explicit.

Have a discussion at a board meeting or retreat about how to make meetings more efficient and still participatory. Examples of meeting agreements for board meetings include:

a. Start on time and end on time. If meetings do not normally start/end on time, check with members to verify that they are held at the most convenient time for the majority of board members. If socializing before the meeting makes it difficult to get the meeting started, request that members to come half an hour early. The most effective way to start a meeting on time is ... to start the meeting on time! In this way you signal to board members that you are serious about respecting both their time as volunteers and the overall governance needs of the organization.

b. If ending on time is the problem, you can:

- Use a consent agenda.
- Agree to longer meetings.
- Enforce the meeting agreements.
- Reduce the amount you try to cover in a single meeting and/or add another board meeting to the schedule.

c. Stick to the topic. Limit your comments to the topic at hand and wait until an appropriate time to introduce new ideas. Sometimes meetings need to deviate from the planned agenda, and that is fine as long as everyone agrees to the change.

- d. Participate and encourage others to join in the discussions.** As one media-related nonprofit board expressed it, “Share the air time.” One way to allow room for everyone to speak is to speak concisely yourself. Another way to encourage participation is to go around the room and ask each member to offer their point of view about a given topic. Anyone who does not want to speak can “pass.”
- An important aspect of this guideline is to encourage board members to say what is on their mind *in the board meeting* and not wait until they’re in the parking lot. The essence of leadership is being able to raise a question for the board’s consideration and ensure that all members have the opportunity to express a point of view. The more practice all board members have in speaking up, the better equipped they will be to take on difficult issues.
- e. Do not repeat your point.** It is often tempting to repeat an idea, particularly if you feel strongly about a certain outcome. If you do not think you have been heard, however, you may need to do so. If it is clear that people have heard you (and particularly if they do not agree), do not keep restating your point in the hope of changing minds. More often than not it will only annoy the other member(s).
- f. Listen.** Allow other people to finish their thoughts. Hearing out others (particularly when in conflict) is a good way to model how you would like your own ideas to be received. Also, listen to what someone is saying, not necessarily to how they are saying it (no matter how much you may disagree).
- g. Focus on ideas, not people.** By directing comments to the ideas presented, rather than the people or person offering the idea, the group has a better chance of reaching a solution. When people feel personally attacked, it is very difficult to get to the heart of an issue and come to a final decision.
- h. Be respectful.** This is often a difficult challenge since what one person feels is respectful behavior might be seen as unacceptable to another. Actions like interrupting can be the norm in some cultures, while offensive in others. The best way to determine what constitutes respectful behavior is to talk about it explicitly, and make meeting arrangements on what is/is not acceptable.
- It should be clearly stated that the board will not tolerate such obvious examples as eye-rolling, foot tapping, exasperated sighing or other forms of dismissive body language.

4. Use a consent agenda.

Many boards have started to group the acceptance of committee reports and minutes into a section of the agenda called the “consent agenda.” This is a way of minimizing the time spent on reports and maximizing the time available for substantive discussion. Reports and minutes are sent in advance and a motion is made at the board meeting to accept all of the items listed in the consent agenda section.

- a. **Any board member can request that an item on the consent agenda be moved to a discussion item.** For example, if the fundraising committee is recommending a certain cost per ticket for the upcoming event and another board member feels that it is too high or too low, that board member might ask to hear more about why that ticket price was selected.

5. Use the board meeting to help members stay connected to the organization's mission, stakeholders and operating environment.

Extended discussions on key issues and trends impacting the organization helps board members fulfill their leadership responsibilities. Understanding these developments help the board to play a more effective role in discussions about strategy and new directions. Hearing from clients, program staff, regulators, funders and other experts helps board members place the organization in a context, and understand the issues more broadly than they can when the only source of information is the executive director or written reports. And finally, hearing about what the organization is accomplishing keeps the board connected to their passion for the mission, and to the importance of the work they are doing.

6. Link a meeting to a social opportunity.

As described in the materials on creating a productive board culture, board members need to get to know each other on a more personal level in order to develop the trust required to tackle difficult discussions. In the same breath, many people are too busy to spend much time before or after the meeting socializing. At least once a year, it is useful to have a social event just before or after a board meeting to build more personal connections.

- a. **Some board members are uncomfortable or impatient with social activities.** For those who find socializing difficult, make introductions to ease the process of making connections with other members. For members who are impatient with non-business activities, remind them that this is an investment in the board's ability to act as a cohesive group over the long-term.

Role of the Board Chair

The person leading the meeting is central to the success of the gathering. Many leaders, however, do not have a great deal training or experience running effective meetings. Some of the mistakes leaders make include:

- They dominate the meeting and leave little room for discussion.
- They allow the meeting to ramble on without concern for the agenda timeframe or required actions.
- They allow members to repeat themselves, interrupt or otherwise behave disrespectfully.

There are many good resources available for board chairs and meeting leaders. To help board chairs get off to a good start, you can provide them with one or two of these materials, or have one board chair pass them along to the next.

Part of the problem comes from a board chair not understanding his or her role. That role is to facilitate and encourage the best possible performance from the board as a whole and from individual members. A board chair should not be associated with particular board factions. He or she should pay attention to what is best for the organization and board as a whole. The board chair should do what is needed to ensure that the overall good is served.

In board meetings, the board chair should play the following roles:

- Help the board set meeting agreements.
- Remind the board of those agreements as meetings proceed.
- Work with the executive director and executive committee to create an agenda that focuses on
 - 1) what is most important and
 - 2) what can be accomplished in the time available.
- Encourage everyone to participate.
- Set the tone of the discussion.

Role of Board Members

Board members often expect the board chair to do it all. However, individual board members also have the responsibility and authority to help meetings be more productive. Individual board members can:

- Remind other board members of the meeting agreements.
- Propose an action that will help make the meeting more productive (e.g. send a topic back to committee for further work before putting a matter to a vote, or suggest a return to a topic if the discussion has strayed, etc.).

Role of the Executive Director

Setting the agenda for the board meeting is often seen as the executive director's role. We feel strongly that this role belongs to the board in collaboration with the executive director. The E.D., however, can play a very important role in the success of the meeting. He or she can encourage the board to participate fully and help them be prepared to do so by taking responsibility for the following:

- Help the board chair and/or executive committee identify and prioritize the most important items for discussion.
- Ensure that board members have adequate information and in a timely manner.
- Share information with the board chair and/or executive committee about meeting practices at other nonprofits and best practices from experts in the field.
- Help the board chair keep the meeting on track.