

# Ten Tips for Improving Your Board Meetings

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Here are some suggestions for how to improve a non-profit board business meeting<sup>1</sup>. Some of the tips will be familiar ones, some not. They all work!

1. Ensure that board members have minutes, reports and a proposed agenda at least several days in advance and that everyone understands the expectation that they be read in advance.
2. Spend some time planning the agenda. This should be done by the chair and executive director (if you have such a staff person) or by the Executive Committee (which usually includes the executive director). The goal should be to limit the meeting agenda to six or seven items and to take note of how much board time needs to be devoted to each one. Some boards adopt a “consent agenda” one item where they put several routine matters requiring approval but not discussion.<sup>2</sup>
3. If your organization is focused on achieving specific outcomes or strategic goals, build each meeting agenda around two or three of these instead of the “old business, new business and reports” type categories associated with a traditional or pro forma agendas.
4. Review each proposed agenda item to determine if it needs to be considered at all by the board. Is it a governance or operational matter, a decision or information item? The answer may not always be clear but the question is a good one. Information items need not be added to the agenda at all; consider listing them below the agenda or meeting notice.<sup>3</sup>
5. Allot a specific amount of time for each item and indicate this on the agenda. You can do this when you are planning the agenda or you can assign priorities and times with the board’s input when reviewing the agenda at the start of every meeting.
6. Build some time into the agenda for increasing affiliation and trust amongst directors. This can enhance the board’s ability to think together. Connecting at a more personal level with a “check in” at the beginning of meetings can enable some to put something on their mind aside and can encourage the group to get into a listening mode. This works best when all board members are given a quiet moment before going around. Boards might also try using specific affiliation building questions<sup>4</sup>
7. Share some food! Having a pot of coffee on and a plate of cookies, cheese and crackers, apple slices or a dish of candy to pass around is good for setting a positive atmosphere. Supper time or breakfast meetings, if there are resources to provide a meal, even occasionally, works very well in helping build a social atmosphere that cultivates trust and the ability of the group to work together.

8. Do not get too caught up in the use of formal parliamentary procedures.<sup>5</sup> For important decision items (e.g. minutes, budget and policy approvals) you should rely on motions and votes. For information and discussion items (e.g. executive director's report, financial report) it may be sufficient to 'go around' and see if people have questions.
9. Try to move away from meeting agendas that routinely include the presentation and discussion of committee reports. If a report does not raise important issues or require a policy decision but you want the minutes to show that the board has seen it, the chair should ask: "Are there any items in this report that anyone feels needs board discussion? If not, could I have a motion to accept the report?"
10. In terms of the executive director's report (e.g. one that outlines progress towards objectives, activities and actions, staffing changes and current issues) there are several ways to improve how it is handled. One is to make it a separate agenda item and allot only 15 minutes to it. The second is to eliminate a separate executive director's report item and align the executive director's reporting to the key strategic items on the agenda and have the executive director speak to each of these in turn. In either case the executive director's written report should be in point form and should highlight the items, if any, which require board attention. Executive directors should avoid reviewing their report if it has been provided in advance and instead speak to those items that require a board decision or advice.

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<sup>1</sup> Boards may want to consider having some meetings over the course a year that totally depart from the usual "business" or "fiduciary" agenda, including strategic planning discussions and meetings with stakeholders. The kind of thinking required for effective oversight and policy decisions is not the same as what is required for more creative, prospective discussion; mixing the two often does not work well.

<sup>2</sup> Four or five items should be routinely on the board's 'business meeting' agenda: review and approval of the agenda; approval of minutes of the previous meeting; financial report (although not necessarily every meeting), report of the executive director. While it is good to follow up on actions decided at the previous meetings, keep in mind that "business arising from the minutes", is not a strategic or mission-focused category. In the same vein, take "correspondence" off the agenda too as a routine item. Some regular agenda items can be handled as a "consent agenda" within the main agenda that allows the board to approve a group of things together without discussion or individual motions. This usually includes the acceptance of the agenda, minutes of the previous meeting as well as matters debated previously and only in need of approval. A "consent agenda" can free up a few minutes to a half hour for more substantial discussion on other matters. Information on "consent agenda" is easily found on the internet

<sup>3</sup> Boards need to be informed but not all information distributed to board members needs to be put on the agenda. Boards may want to list, below the agenda, information provided to board members "for their information (FYI)". This might include correspondence, committee reports, and job descriptions, notices of staff changes, and news items and community notices relevant to the work of the organization.

<sup>4</sup> Some examples of questions that could be used to enhance affiliation include: what is your family history; what is new in your life since we last met, what is one of your most significant childhood experiences, what brought you here (to this board or organization), what characteristics have you inherited from your parents? Work related questions are typically not as effective as questions about family, children, life experiences and politics in building affiliation. Responsibility for treats and affiliation icebreakers can be rotated.

<sup>5</sup> Your board may want to create its own set of meeting procedures for handling key decision items like the annual budget or policy approval. For important decision items (e.g. minutes, annual budget and policy approvals) you should indeed rely on motions and votes. For information and discussion items (e.g. Executive Director's report and a financial report that confirms the organization is operating according to the board approved budget) it may be sufficient to 'go around' and see if people have questions. Committee reports also may not need to be approved. Even a one-page document of established decision procedures is valuable guide to everyone around the table and the board chair and secretary particularly. Every board will be a little different in what it feels needs a formal decision.