



## **PRODUCTIVE MEETINGS**

Efficiency and effectiveness are key objectives of a good board meeting. Without concerted efforts, it is easy to waste time and resources, dampen members' enthusiasm and interest, and end up meeting without demonstrable results. Assist your board in structuring meetings so they will become productive for the organization and worthwhile and interesting for the participants. By planning ahead and focusing on activities before, during and after the meeting, you move closer to efficient meeting procedures and outcomes that meet the expectations. First, create an agenda that guides the meeting.

### Agenda

The agenda is the recipe for the meeting. It is the tool for the chair to help guide the discussion and a reminder for the members to stay focused.

- Make sure the agenda ties in with the strategic plan. Focus on your big issues.
- Indicate which items are for discussion and which ones simply informative. Identify action items and assignments.
- Separate strategic issues, resource items, and operational matters. Start with the most important questions. Indicate time limits for agenda items.
- Make a habit of including time for board development: responsibilities of a board member, how to read financial statements, legal obligations. Frame a question for later communication or a themed meeting.
- Adopt a consent agenda to leave more time for constructive debate.

### Before the meeting

Without due preparation, your meetings may end up aimless get-togethers. Make sure that before the meeting the following tasks have been accomplished. Think of other creative ways to get your board members ready.

- Send the agenda and attachments to all board members at least two weeks before the meeting. Color code action items. Electronic documents save time and money!
- Include all written reports describing past actions (last meeting minutes, committee reports).
- Assign a contact person for questions and clarifications for consent agenda items.
- Include a memorandum or a cover page from the chief executive listing issues for discussion.

- Assign maximum length to reports.
- Set up a chain phone system close to the meeting date to remind everybody personally of the upcoming meeting and assignments.
- Board members: Read the material sent to you. Come to the meeting prepared. Be ready to participate.

### During the meeting

Meetings need to be managed. Board members lose interest if they are not challenged and able to utilize their special skills. Listening to repetitive reports is not a constructive way of using limited meeting time. Make sure that the majority of time allotment is spent on future issues. Here are some choices for energizing your meetings. Create a code of conduct for board meetings: No cacophony tolerated. No personal attacks allowed. Differing opinions respected.

- Change the layout of the room regularly to initiate interaction and contact between different board members. If you have a large board, take advantage of small group discussions.
- Use graphic displays, pictures, or slides as much as possible to keep all participants actively engaged and focused on the same issue.
- Have themed meetings when applicable. Serious issues warrant additional time for discussion: fundraising, liability issues, outreach, or board composition.
- Bring in experts to add an outsider's view. Rely on staff for information when discussing programs.
- Try to avoid overly structured and procedural meetings. Allow time for constructive and free discussion and deliberation.
- Design a colorful Stop! sign for board members to use when they have a question. It is a less intimidating way to interrupt a speaker.
- Have a resource table in the room to place additional material for board members to browse.
- Integrate evaluation of the meeting in the schedule periodically. Use index cards for questions and comments, have everyone fill out a short questionnaire before leaving the meeting room, or have a different board member observe the meeting and provide comments afterwards. Change the evaluation format regularly.

### **After the meeting**

Without diligent follow-up, meeting decisions easily fall into oblivion. Keep board members informed between the meetings.

- Consider integrating a standard short executive session after each board meeting for review purposes and allowing the chair to make coaching comments for the future.
- E-mail or send by regular mail a list of assignments to each board member; copy to the chair.
- Have the chair or another contact person get in touch with board members who did not attend the meeting.
- Mail board members newsletters of what is happening between meetings, results of meeting action items, press clippings, personal news items or any other material that keeps the organization in board members' thoughts constantly.

### **References**

*Meeting, and Exceeding Expectations*

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