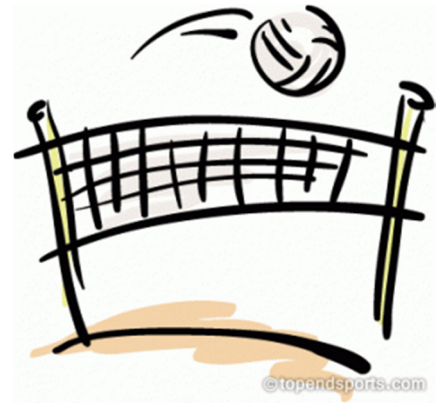


Boardroom Volleyball

Ever watch a board meeting that looked more like a volleyball game? The sport is between teams of players separated by a net, each trying to score points before the ball hits the ground. (Equate the board table to the net.)

In the case of a board meeting, a director throws an idea in the air. Other directors comment and ask questions to keep it in the air, the idea is spiked a few times, and it either fails (hits the ground) or it passes. The process may go on for 15 to 30 minutes at which time another ball is served and the discussion repeats.

The involvement and behavior of the directors (players) make it look more like volleyball than governance. Here are the sounds of boardroom volleyball.



- I have an idea!
- I hear you but I prefer graphic representations so I can't understand what you're saying.
- I think it's a good idea, we "kind of" do that and I "sort of" like the idea, "you know."
- Count me in but don't count on me, I can't be accountable with my busy schedule.
- Sorry, I'm a linear thinker so I just don't understand this discussion.
- I know our staff is at capacity and committees are underperforming, but I don't think this will require much time.
- I remember when we tried something similar --- it didn't work so I'd be against it.
- Would you repeat the statement? I was distracted by texting on my phone.
- Hey what's was the motion again?
- Enough said, "Let's vote!"

It takes a good meeting chair and the discipline of directors to avoid boardroom volleyball.

Discuss this playbook with the “team.”

- ✓ The chair conducts the meeting and must insist on decorum; requiring that directors speak or ask questions after being recognized.
- ✓ Carefully follow the “threads” of ideas. A question may be asked. Two or three people offer answers and several directors begin speaking; turning the discussion into a tangled mess with nobody remembering the original issue.
- ✓ When a statement is made or question asked, determine its relevance. Restate the question and be sure the poser gets an answer before moving on.
- ✓ Avoid menial discussions during governance. It is doubtful that a chat about what was on the menu at last year’s banquet is good governance. Insist that conversations and questions that the send board “into the weeds,” be handled *after* the meeting or are directed to committees.
- ✓ Insist that directors prepare for meetings and do their homework.
- ✓ Rely on a carefully crafted agenda, explaining there is an expectation to complete all the work within the allotted timeframe.
- ✓ Depend on the mission (reason for existence) to frame all discussions.
- ✓ The board’s work should advance elements of the strategic plan. Keep it on the table and frequently ask, “What part of the plan does your idea (question or comment) support in our plan?”
- ✓ Be sure directors know their role and responsibilities through leadership training and access to governance resources.

When meetings sound like a volleyball game set down the ball and return to the motion or item on the agenda. All directors should be empowered to say, “this conversation does not seem like governance, let’s get back to our responsibilities so we can complete the agenda.”

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