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Chasing Squirrels

Bob Harris, CAE

If you've heard it once you've heard it dozens of times at board meetings: "I just have a question."

I observed it at a meeting this week. The offending director may or may not have realized what she was causing.

Without being recognized by the chair, she said, "I just have a question." She followed her question with what seemed to be a personal opinion. For example, "Have we ever done it this way? I think if we change our approach and use new technology we will get better engagement."

The size of this board is 20 persons. As I listened to the question, nine of the directors added their input, for example:

- "I know the answer to your question..."
- "I tend to agree with you..."
- "I think we tried that once before and it didn't work...."

Directors have a duty to ask appropriate questions at the right time. But they should not hijack the meeting.

Squirrels

When a dog sees a squirrel it is natural to want to chase the animal. Directors sometimes act similarly. When something captures their attention they are quick to go down that path.

At this board meeting nearly half the board chased the squirrel until it ran up a tree. The conversation died a natural death and the board then looked at the chair as if wondering, "What's next?"

The chair took an exasperated sign. It was time to get back to the work laid out by the meeting agenda.

Chasing squirrels is dangerous. It wastes time. People speak as if they have some insider information ("I know the answer.") Allotted time for the agenda lapses.

Taking Control

It is human nature – or the nature of dogs – to chase squirrels. There are ways to curb the behavior.

1. **Recognize it Happens.** Teach board members that squirrel chases are likely to happen, it's only natural. If they recognize the potential distraction, they are less likely to join the chase.
2. **Listen for It.** Directors can discourage squirrely behaviors by not responding when it arises. Let the board chair maintain the decorum of the meeting. Staff can answer the questioner during the break or after the meeting without engaging the whole board.
3. **Meeting Preparation** – Directors will have fewer questions if they receive and read the agenda and materials in advance. *Before* a duly called meeting directors are invited or expected to ask their questions of committees, officers and staff.
4. **Respect the Chair** – Directors don't have the floor unless they have been recognized by the chair. Have them ask to be recognized or raise their hand before they start down the path of "I just have a question." Directors proclaiming they have a quick question may be advised to hold their inquiry until the break.
5. **Respect the Agenda** – The agenda has been crafted to achieve results. The timing has been worked out to make the best use of board meeting. Every squirrel-chase takes away from the business at hand.

It requires discipline to not chase squirrels. Use these tips and techniques.

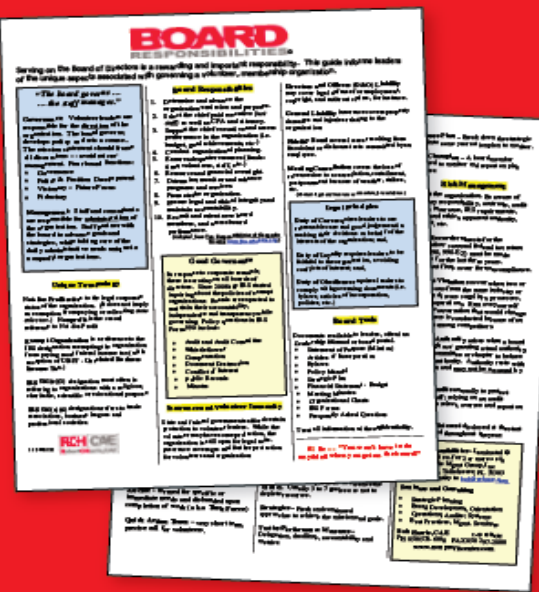
- ✓ Gavel the meeting to order. When a conversation seems to go astray and the chair does not have charge of the meeting, gavel things back to order.
- ✓ Respond with a question. For a director with a reputation for chasing squirrels, ask them if they prepared by reading the reports that were sent with the meeting notice.
- ✓ We're in the weeds. Empower everybody on the board to use the phrase, "we are in the weeds." They can share responsibility for staying focused on the agenda.

The board's role is governance. Governance should address the future and be conducted at a high level. Chasing squirrels is a waste of time.

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