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bob@rchcae.com

Revise the Board Agenda

Bob Harris, CAE

The board meetings were boring.

The agendas included a dozen reports and updates that ate up valuable time. Discussions were not innovative, inspiring nor visionary. Directors whispered, "This is a waste of our time."

It is a misconception that meetings are for listening to reports. Especially when the reports could have been distributed and read in advance.

Asked why the agenda includes so many reports, the elected chair said, "We've always done it that way."

Purpose

An agenda ensures that meetings are purposeful --- a framework communicating desired outcomes. The agenda sets a starting and ending point, so directors can pace their discussions.

It allocates sufficient time so each topic or program can be vetted. Carefully crafted, it paints a picture and projects desired outcomes, allowing the board to function as a team.

"At the start of the meeting the chief elected officer should describe what needs to be accomplished and the desired outcomes."

Bad Habits

Do you have an elected chair who believes it is "only fair" that all reports should be presented or heard?

In this case directors may have to listen to reports even when they start with, "We haven't done anything but I'll give you an update."

Another bad habit: Starting late and running over the time scheduled for adjournment. The chair and attendees must be respectful of the times set by the agenda.

Discipline is required If the board uses a consent agenda. A consent agenda is the process of distributing the officer, committee and staff reports in advance when the meeting notice is sent.

By moving general reports to consent there is more time to focus on visionary efforts.

Of course this requires reports to be *prepared in advance* by the officers, staff and committees. Subsequently, the *directors must be disciplined to read the reports*.

You can identify the director who did not read the reports by the frequent query, “I just have a question.”

Craft a New Agenda

I know of no rule, law or policy that says an agenda cannot be redesigned. Take the opportunity to craft an agenda that works for the board.

The aim of every meeting is significant outcomes that advance the mission. Volunteers want to make best use of their time.

Try these agenda adaptations:

- Crafting the agenda is a shared responsibility of chief elected officer and chief staff officer.
- In developing the agenda, consider how it specifically reflects or advances the strategic plan.
- Use a consent agenda to distribute reports in advance, and urge directors to read them before arriving at the meeting --- a fiduciary duty.
- At the start of the meeting the chief elected officer should describe what needs to be accomplished and the desired outcomes.
- Include the mission statement at the top or bottom of the agenda. Frequently ask, “How does this discussion advance our mission?”
- Divide the agenda in thirds. One-third updates; one-third essential operations and approvals; one-third visioning.

Board Meeting Agenda	
Location – Date - Time	
I. Call to Order ¹	Chair – 8:30
II. <u>Approval</u> of Minutes	Secretary
III. Treasurer’s Report <u>Acceptance</u>	Treasurer 8:15
IV. Consent Agenda (Reports distributed in advance, no action)	
a) Executive Director Report	
b) Committee and Officer Reports	
c) Misc. Reports - Background	
V. Strategic Goals Discussion	8:35
A. <u>Advocacy and Gov’t Affairs</u>	
B. <u>Member Support</u>	
C. <u>Professional Development</u>	
D. <u>Organizational Excellence</u>	
VI. Mega Issue	9:00
VII. Old - Unfinished Business	9:30
VIII. New Business	
IX. Adjournment and <u>What’s Next</u> ²	9:55
Mission Statement:	
¹ Reminder about antitrust avoidance, conflicts of interest, and confidentiality.	
² Review of assignments and expectations before the meeting adjourns.	

- Include time markers so attendees know whether a topic is expected to take 5 or 45 minutes, for example.
- Where topics and reports have “champions,” list their names so they know they are expected to lead the discussion.
- In lieu of reports, use a dashboard to visually depict progress by agreeing on the performance measures the board wants to monitor.
- Agree how far in advance the agenda and supporting documents will be distributed or made accessible; you want directors to anticipate and allocate time for preparation.
- Use technology, encouraging directors to bring their tablets and laptops and/or project the topics on a screen. Avoid directors ruffling through piles of papers.
- Consider adding a “mega issue.” A topic that is of particular importance that encourages innovation and problem solving.
- “What’s Next?” Before the meeting adjourns, ask what’s next to ensure understanding of assignments and deadlines.
- After the board meeting analyze the minutes. If they don’t reflect significant results, consider additional revisions to the agenda until it is honed for a high performing board.

I’ve found that every board member, and every meeting, has an intent to achieve significant results. The agenda should be the platform for success.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, offers free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.