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Focused Board Meetings

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Many factors detract from good board meetings, ranging from poor room setup to poorly designed agenda. Some executives describe their board as having ADHD - attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

Executives offered ideas to keep their boards more focused

Consent Agenda – Distribute reports in advance of the meeting with the agenda notice. If directors prepare by reading the reports in advance (it is their fiduciary duty of care), then a motion can be made to “Accept the reports as provided.” Controversial reports and action items should be moved to regular business if needed. A consent agenda provides more time for priority issues.

Respect Time – Everyone’s time is a valuable. Show respect for time by making certain there is need for the meeting; postponing if there is no reason to convene. If a critical issue arises between meetings use on-line meetings or delegate authority to the executive committee. Start and end meetings on time.

Board Development – Plan an annual orientation for the board. Design it as a “refresh and blend” to update directors on priorities and budget while giving new directors a chance to blend into the governance team.

Set Ground Rules – Agree upon ground rules for the board. These might include insisting on accountability for commitments, professionalism in association dealings, confidentiality, respect amongst volunteers and staff, timely responses, and acting as a role model.

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We are in the Weeds – Conversations often drop from the level of governing to tactics. Directors and staff should recognize the descent in conversations by asking, “Is this governance or are we in the weeds?”

Craft the Agenda – Design an agenda to achieve results. If reports and updates dominate, move them to the “consent agenda” to leave room for meaningful discussions. Establish a protocol for adding items to the agenda in advance of meetings. Eliminate the usual call for “new business.”

Timed Agenda – Add time markers to the agenda. For instance, financial report – ten minutes; legislative action – 30 minutes. Time indicators frame the length and depth of discussions.

Leadership Development – Provide training so directors understand their responsibilities. Ask them to sign a commitment form acknowledging they will work to advance the mission and goals, serve the members and read the governing documents.

Room Setup – The room, board table and seating make an impact. An open-U with the chief elected officer at the closed end of the table works best. Be sure there is access to adjust the room temperature and enough space for food and beverage. Consider whether providing a meal is a distraction due to waiter service, a buffet line or eating.

Digital or Paper – Directors are transitioning from printed notebooks and paper to use of their own tablets and laptops. Project reports on a central screen to keep directors focused on the discussion.

Mission Focused – The mission statement should be familiar to the board. Keep it on the agenda and post it on the meeting room wall. Start meetings with a “mission-moment,” reminding directors how their work has had significant impact. A frequent refrain might be, “Does this discussion advance our mission?”

Call-Ins – Meetings require a quorum. Instead of in-person attendance, calling in may be convenient but callers can be a distraction with background noises or dropping off the call. Set protocols for directors on the phone and urge in-person attendance to maximize understanding and engagement.

Guest Attendance – Some guests are included because they are identified in the bylaws, often called ex-officio members. Other guests are drop-ins wondering what the board is doing. Guests can be a distraction and change the dynamics of board discussion. Have a protocol and understanding for their presence.

Minute Taking – Don’t let the board secretary try to record every statement made. In most cases, “brief is better.” Follow a template rather than making the minutes look like a newsletter with interesting details. Ask legal counsel whether or not they suggest recording the names of the motion maker and seconder.

Rely on the Roadmap – The strategic plan is the roadmap. Keep it on the board table. If new projects are suggested, check them against the plan. You might hear, “That’s a good project, what should we take off our existing plan to take on a new project?”

Assessment – Take a few minutes before adjournment to ask directors if they think the meeting was effective and how it can be improved. Directors might suggest less paper, shorter or fewer meetings, changes in room set up and location, time of day, etc.

There are many ways to improve board focus and outcomes. No board should not act as if it has attention deficit, hyper activity disorder. Discuss ways to improve focus and reduce distractions. Thanks for the input by attendees at the US Chamber's Institute for Organization Management.

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