



How to Run a Successful Nonprofit Board Meeting in 8 Steps

Organizational
Management

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It's really no secret that your non-profit's or association's board of directors is pivotal to your organization's success.

Your board of directors are the standard bearers... foundation builders... strategic plan developers and managers... chief cheerleaders

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stability, and are the public face of your organization.

Or they should be.

However, your experience with board meetings might be quite different... and a little less effective.

We've worked with a lot of small, volunteer-led organizations over the years, and one thing we've consistently heard is that it can be hard to keep your board on track.

Maria always wants to rehash the success of your latest fundraising campaign even if it's not on the agenda.

Joe shows up late and derails the whole conversation.

Vivian, on the other hand, hasn't spoken in three meetings. You're not even sure if she knows the other board members' names.

If any of those situations sound familiar, don't worry: you're not alone. We've put together these eight tips to help take you from board-dom (see what we did there?) to board success based on advice from our customers (which you'll see throughout this piece) as well as our own experience — and some common board meeting FAQs for team members who are just

Ready to conquer your next nonprofit board meeting? Read on!

1. Send Out the Agenda Early

While it seems like common practice to set an agenda before a board meeting, it's an element that can sometimes fall to the wayside. But setting an agenda ensures that any meeting runs smoothly and business moves forward. This is especially important for board meetings where you may go for a while, sometimes a month or even quarterly, between meetings, so there are a lot of items to cover.

Here are other things to keep in mind when building an agenda prior to your board meeting:

- Include links to relevant reports and financial statements you will review during the meeting or board members should have reviewed prior to the meeting.
- Discuss your most important agenda items early in the meeting when members are most engaged.
- Dana Mordecai, former Vice President of the [Texas Association of Graduate Admissions Professionals](#), noted that aside from the agenda for their monthly meeting, her board sets actual meeting

back to those periodically to see if they are on track.

- Consider implementing a "consent agenda" which members have used to cut down on wasted time and boredom that happens when "bored" members spend precious meeting time reviewing reports and documents that could have been reviewed beforehand. A consent agenda can be one item that can include, for example, your meeting minutes, the financial or other reports that the group was tasked with reviewing before the meeting – all of which simply require approval.

Dr. Rick Lent, [meeting expert](#), puts the benefits of a strong meeting agenda by saying, "if the task is clear, you can galvanize the group to accomplish it."

2. Start and End on Time

Nothing is worse than a meeting that drags on forever. Having an agenda will definitely avoid the long-lasting meeting. Other ways to make sure that [your board meeting starts and ends on time and makes every minute count](#) include:

- Be realistic about the time frame of your meeting. It's tempting to want to be conscious of people's time and set a

an hour and a half, or a half-day off-site, be realistic about that and make the time commitment clear.

- Make sure the frequency of your meetings works for you and the board. If you're getting together quarterly, but you've noticed that your meetings are close to two-hours long and board members are complaining about the length, consider meeting monthly. You may be meeting more often, but you'll probably find the meeting length will be less.
- Assign someone to be a time monitor and have them signal any time constraints to the group. These people should feel empowered to say, "We have 30 minutes left, and we still have three agenda items to get to," or, "We're coming up on the last 15 minutes of the meeting." This person can be the same one who helps set and monitor meeting goals.

3. Implement Robert's Rules of Order

Gary Roth, former VP Trips at [Austin Skiers & Boarders](#), noted that his board has found that using [Robert's Rules Of Order "In Brief"](#) offers the structure they need in a more simple format for small organizations. Henry Martyn Robert

basically allowed for strong-willed people who were presented differing viewpoints.

Having a structure can help ensure you have something to turn to when you're asking people to behave in a respectful, productive manner. To keep the board on topic and moving forward, Gary suggested, "it's just a matter of politely telling people: we'll discuss that at the end or under new business."

4. Ensure You Have Someone Responsible for Detailed Meeting Minutes

Keeping effective meeting minutes saves time and helps track progress. Rick suggested that it can be helpful to have members other than the board chair or president take on roles, such as having a timekeeper and a note taker. These individuals can help keep things on track, without the chair having to constantly bring the meeting to order or try to convince people to move on.

Meeting minutes helps hold members accountable for next steps, and they're also instrumental in sending a recap of the meeting and cutting down on future meeting fatigue by

beginning of your meeting reviewing old business.

(And if you'd like to up your meeting note game, [here are several meeting note templates and examples to help get you started!](#))

5. Focus on Strategy

Speaking of avoiding wasting precious meeting time on recaps, it's good to remember that a board's role in a nonprofit is, ultimately, strategic. Of course, every organization is different, and depending on the size and resources of your nonprofit, board member participation varies.

But when it comes to board meetings, keeping the meeting goals focused on an organization's goals, missions, and strategic planning will be the best use of the board members' time.

6. Give Everyone a Chance to Speak

We all know that person. The person in the meeting who tends to monopolize the conversation. Sometimes, it's not one person,

passionate response from a few of the same faces.

While everyone enjoys an impassioned, well-intentioned speaker, it's key that everyone has the space to speak, even if they don't always choose to use it. This means politely reminding people to stick to the agenda and encouraging input from specific people who don't often weigh in.

7. Ensure Everyone Knows What They're Responsible For

Making people feel like their participation is needed motivates them to actually do what they're supposed to do. Traci Kantowski, former President of the [Junior League of Kane & DuPage Counties](#), introduced the idea of "board champions." This concept identifies one board member who will "champion" a specific project or task to completion.

Board champions, in addition to regular board assignments like treasurer, secretary, etc. mean that everyone knows what they're responsible for and tasks are completed.

8. Build a Team Atmosphere

I know most of the things on this list like building a strong meeting agenda, setting board goals and requirements, and so on seem really practical, but they are small ways you can build a positive team atmosphere.

Board members are generally generous and passionate people who volunteer time despite full-time jobs and other commitments.

By making the life of a board member easier by making their roles known, giving them clear ways to make an impact, and encouraging healthy conversations, you can help your members enjoy their roles, which makes them willing participants, improves retention, and means your organization will be stronger.

Common Nonprofit Board Meeting FAQs:

Do nonprofits have to have open board meetings?

Board meetings are most effective when they are contained to board members, maybe a few relevant staff members, and an occasional "guest speaker" who may be sharing insights or sharing information related to an agenda item.

Board meetings already have a lot of voices in them, and, as the webinar proved, it can be hard to keep just the board on track. But we have seen success with nonprofits that publicly post board member meeting notes and relevant board meeting documents like financial reports.

If you want to provide this level of transparency to your members and the public, you could include a section on your website in the "About Us" section.

How often does a nonprofit board have to meet?

The frequency of meetings is often set by an executive director or a president, but it's common for board nonprofit boards to meet monthly. You'll also find boards that meet quarterly. These common frequencies allow for everyone on the board to decide on a regular date and time (the more often you meet the less likely that you'll see full attendance), and it allows board members to focus on high-level strategy rather than focusing on the nitty-gritty details. If you go longer than a quarter

on task and achieve meeting goals since much of the meeting will be a recap.

Can nonprofit staff attend board meetings?

Yes, staff can attend board meetings. But many executive directors and presidents will say, "just because you can do something, doesn't always mean you should." For very small nonprofits it's not uncommon to have the 2-3 staff members join board meetings as observers. They may even give a quick update on their biggest projects.

But since the function of staff and board members is different, many nonprofits see the benefit of keeping board meetings relegated to board members. If this path is chosen, the executive director attends and can debrief the staff on any relevant pieces of information, and staff can be given access to meeting minutes and documents.

What do you think? Will you apply some of these simple, but effective tips and tactics to your next meeting? What else can you suggest to help your membership peers run more effective board meetings?

[Check out other ways you can build an effective nonprofit board](#), and feel to reach out [with any](#).

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