



January 17, 2017

How to Set an Effective Nonprofit Agenda

Written by Jeremy Barlow

What's the difference between an unproductive nonprofit board meeting and an effective nonprofit board meeting? The [board meeting agenda](#) and the board chair who uses it.

The agenda is the board chair's most important tool. When a non-profit board meeting agenda is written well, it helps the [board chair](#) to make fast decisions about managing agenda items. An experienced board chair knows that items on the agenda signal some type of action from the board. When an agenda item is not ready for the board to take action, it signals the board chair to remove or table the item from the agenda, or move it to a committee for further discussion and exploration.

A well-planned agenda helps the board chair keep the meeting focused on the strategic planning of the mission and prevents members from derailing the meeting with tangents and disruptions.

Risk of Having a Poorly Run Nonprofit Board Meeting

Agenda

If you want to gauge whether your nonprofit board meeting is [productive](#), take a look around the boardroom. Are any of your fellow board members discreetly sending text messages under the table? Can you detect anyone mindlessly doodling on the agenda document? Are members of the board silent, or do they appear to be zoned out? Are you noticing that the agenda items continually go off topic? Do the discussions seem to be about everything except fundraising?

These are all indicators that your agenda needs some tweaking. It might be time to tweak a few other issues, too.

What Makes an Effective Nonprofit Board Meeting?

When preparing for a nonprofit board meeting, it's a good idea to give the task before you a little scope. Board meetings should be less about updates and general discussions and more about decisions and actions. Write your agenda with this in mind. Try to imagine how your agenda will play out in the boardroom. Here are some things to keep in mind to keep your nonprofit board meeting focused and effective:

Efficiency

Start with a good [template](#) for your agenda that you can use for every meeting. Include the mission of the organization to keep board members mindful of their purpose. Some nonprofit organizations make a practice of reading the mission at the start of the board meeting.

Start writing the agenda shortly after the previous meeting has ended. Some of the items are on every agenda. Most likely, there are a few items that will carry over to the new agenda. As you move items from the previous agenda to the next agenda, be sure to place them under the correct headings. For example, some items may need to be moved from new business to old business.

Some nonprofit organizations like to use the [parking lot](#) method for items that have lower priority. Your parking lot can be as simple as a list that the board chair holds. It can also be a flip chart on an easel where board members can place items for discussion on Post-it notes during the meeting and add them to the parking lot. If time allows, the board chair may decide to allow time to discuss one or more parking lot items. Using the parking lot lets board members know that their ideas are important and that the board chair will address them as time permits.

Preparedness

Arriving at the board meeting to find the board chair fumbling with papers and scrambling to start the meeting is a big turnoff for board members who come prepared for a productive nonprofit board meeting.

Schedule time with the board president to go over the agenda and make edits at least two weeks prior to the board meeting.

Prepare a [board meeting notice](#) to remind board members of the upcoming meeting and to remind them to follow up on any tasks from the previous meeting.

Get RSVPs from board members prior to the meeting. The responses will allow you to have plenty of copies of board meeting documents for everyone in attendance. This will also tell you if you need to adjust the order of the agenda because a board member will arrive late.

Always start and stop your board meetings on [time](#). When you make a habit of waiting to start the meeting until you have a [quorum](#) or until all members are present, you will have less time to address your board meeting agenda items. When meetings regularly start late, members begin arriving later and later, and it can be difficult to get meetings back on track with starting on time.

Timeliness

The board chair should think through the agenda items to determine if it's feasible to get through all of the items during the meeting. Decide if there are any items that may require a time limit and decide that ahead of time. Remember that the board meeting should focus more on actions and decisions and leave the bulk of discussions for committee work.

A Good Nonprofit Board Agenda and a Good Board Chair

Your agenda is an important tool for the board chair. The board chair should use the agenda to keep discussions orderly and on-task, by gently steering discussions toward the agenda. Recognize those who contribute good suggestions. Keeping board members active in discussions is a good way to spark new ideas and ignite enthusiasm. Don't let one or two board members dominate every board meeting. Invite less-active members to join in on discussions by periodically asking their opinions.

What Items Should Appear on a Nonprofit Board Meeting Agenda?

If you know that your agenda will be long, consider using a [consent agenda](#) to approve non-controversial items. This leaves you more time to spend on discussing important items.

Since nonprofits center around a charity or a cause, the bulk of the board meeting typically centers on fundraising and grants. It is helpful to get occasional updates on ancillary issues that affect the

organization, but be careful not to let them dominate the agenda. Concentrate the agenda on strategies to move the mission and vision of the nonprofit organization forward.

With this in mind, here are some general items to include on a nonprofit agenda:

- Date, location and time of the meeting
- Call to order
- Approval of prior meeting minutes
- Reports – executive director, committees, staff, financial report (or use a consent agenda)
- Old business
- New business
- Open dialogue
- Public participation
- Comments or announcements
- Adjournment

Take a look at this [template](#) for a nonprofit board meeting agenda, and here is a [sample](#) of an actual agenda for a nonprofit board meeting.

Using the Agenda as a Tool to Set an Effective Nonprofit Board Meeting

The tools for an effective nonprofit board meeting are only as effective as the person who uses them. The board chair is the key player who keeps things moving. In setting up the agenda, it helps when the board chair identifies which board member will lead the discussion for each agenda item.

Be conscious of what it is that you expect to accomplish with each agenda item. Each agenda item should correspond to an action, a decision or a next step.

Concluding Thoughts on an Effective Nonprofit Agenda

A well-written nonprofit board meeting agenda performs half of the work of having an effective meeting for you, and the board chair uses it to do the rest of the work. If you find that your board meetings are still unproductive, there are a few things that you can do to get things back on track.

Try rotating the role of board chair. Each member has much to learn from the other board members. If you notice that one board member outshines the others when filling the role of board chair, consider setting up a mentoring or training session. It will help round out the talent of your board. Another thing you can do is to use a survey to get a better understanding of what the other board members would like to see changed or improved.

Jeremy Barlow

Jeremy is the Director of Digital Marketing at BoardEffect.



Most Popular Posts



Engaging Board Members During a Crisis

It may be tempting to call off or postpone board meetings during a crisis and...



Comparing Board Management Software: Top 5 Considerations

A board portal is a governance software solution that provides boards with a secure platform...

How to Enhance Board Performance [Infographic]

Enhancing Board Performance A high-performing board of directors can be an organization's most valuable asset....