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Improving the Board Experience

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Meetings of the board can be dreaded or difficult to endure. Listening to reports, watching individuals promote personal agendas, a lack of focus on outcomes, and bad behavior leaves some board members wondering if it's worth their time. (It is no wonder it's hard to get a quorum.) How do you create a consistent pleasant leadership experience?

A national association described their meetings as "painful." The chair insisted on monthly conference calls. They decided Sunday evenings would work best. Because of time zones the call started at 9 and discussions rambled past midnight. The staff were told they too had to join the call.

Another association met quarterly but felt they had to maximize the board's time so they worked eight to ten hour days. The agenda expanded to fill the time. The board did plenty of committee work and talked "shop." Reading subsequent minutes one might wonder what was accomplished.

The Volunteer Experience

Few associations have perfected a formula for the ideal board experience where directors are genuinely governing and visioning. The aim is a meeting characterized by positive experiences and achievement.

"We have to transform the volunteer job to be a positive leadership experience if we want to sustain leadership," said Bill Pawlucy, CAE, of AssociationOptions.com.

PREPARATION

Expectations – Clarify expectations of the board at orientation and at the start of meetings. The board's chief elected officer should set the tone and work to include all directors in the discussions. John Boyd, DDS, vice president of the Fort Worth Dental Society in Texas says, "We open meeting by explaining the need for trust. Since we created our mission statement and strategic plan together we should be on the same page. We remind members that the agenda is about the plan and any discussion should start with the premise that each board member is there to make the society better. It is ok to disagree in a respectful healthy way – remembering that the plan drives the goals of the society."

Orientation – The annual orientation is an opportunity for board members to get to know each other, as well as build their confidence in governing processes. Mix in some fun discussions about the interests and hobbies of directors. Late in the year offer 15-minute board development

topics, for example membership trends or technology advances. In general, be sure the first board meeting isn't the first time board members meet.

Venue - Find a unique meeting venue. Look for access to a museum, sports arena or college. Possibly the president or president-elect wants to host a meeting at their home or at a site in their home-town. (Be sure parking is adequate to avoid frustrations upon arrival.)

Rotate – Plan meetings geographically for opportunities to visit local members. “We use our board meetings as an opportunity to greet local members. Directors split them up into small groups to visit members. Their task is to ask members and prospects, ‘What issues keep you up at night,’” explains Margaret Herriges, CAE, IOM, at the Montana Society of CPAs.

Camaraderie – Facilitate interaction to strengthen camaraderie. Arrange fun activities that might pleasantly surprise directors (find an Italian restaurant that allows them to make their own pizzas, for instance.) Plan a “speed dating” session where directors get to know each other, or a contest rewarding volunteers who best know the association. At least once during the year include spouses, partners or family.

Agenda – Organize the agenda by putting the most important items at the start to allow for adequate time. Add time-markers so the board can gauge the anticipated amount of discussion and closure.

Consent Agenda - Circulate reports in advance by using a consent agenda or distributing information with the meeting notice. Directors should submit their questions *before* the meeting to allow for preparation and to avoid surprises. “We have a rule that we don't spend board time discussing something that could have been written in a report,” said Debbie Trueblood, MSW, IOM, CAE, executive director at the Illinois Park and Recreation Association.

Frequency - How often should the board meet? The norm is quarterly. Some plan only three meetings a year, respecting and minimizing the time of volunteers and staff. Postpone meetings if there is not a good reason to meet. (Be cautious of “we've always done it this way” by planning 12 monthly board meetings and 12 meetings of the executive committee.)

Right Size – The larger the board the less engaged directors feel. Volunteers begin to realize they don't have to attend or be accountable because their absences won't be noticed. The IRS suggests the size of the board should allow for meaningful discussions – the national average is 15 directors.

PROCESS AND OUTCOMES

Visioning - Engage the board in visionary discussions; find opportunities to let their ideas soar. Directors should think beyond their term of office, positioning the association for 2020 and beyond. Allow time for board members to tackle an assigned challenge.

Strategy – A strategic plan keeps the board focused. Have it on the table so directors consider it before making recommendations. Include the plan’s goals on the agenda; when someone offers a “good idea” be sure it fits within one of the association’s goal; if not, offer to put the idea in a “parking lot.”

Inside Access - Provide opportunities to hear from experts outside the board’s usual realm. Invite an author, elected official or publisher to share insights exclusively with the board. Directors appreciate access to inside-information.

Data Reporting - Diminish the dependency of listening or reading reports by transforming them into dashboards to concisely depict information. The board should be steering the organization based on knowledge and outcomes, not listening to historical reports.

Committees – Appoint only necessary committees. Replace standing committees with task forces and quick action teams. Be sure committees do their work in advance of board meetings and not at the board table. “When committee actions require board approval we have the chair of the committee appear to present the recommendation, provide the rationale, and to respond to directors’ questions. After all the questions are answered the chair is excused so the board can deliberate freely, eliminating the tendency to ‘send it back to committee,’” explains Chuck Michaels, CAE and CEO at the Pensacola Association of REALTORS.

Breakouts - Make time for small group breakouts. Assign the big-question issues to teams. “Nobody ever said all the board’s work must be done at the formal board table,” offers Melissa Andrews, president and CEO of LeadingAge in Virginia. Break outs encourage directors to contribute who remain quiet in front of the big board.

Staffing - Include integral staff at meetings to provide support. During meals have the staff spread out to get to know the directors or have them host table topics so leaders can learn more about the organization.

Technology - Use technology so directors are looking up at the screen (or on their computers) to ensure information is accessible and understood. Avoid a packet full of pages where directors get lost in the paperwork. If documents are distributed in advance, have a few extras at the board table for directors who may not have brought theirs. For conference calls be sure the technology includes features such a mute button and “raise your hand” to be recognized.

Transparency – No group likes it when a subgroup or the executive officers go into a closed door session, making directors and staff wait outside. Reject behavior that supports secrecy. Consider inviting future leaders to view the board in action; it nearly always puts the board on their best behavior.

Executive Session – Frequent executive sessions become breeding grounds for gripes and rumors. Use the sessions only for business items that need attention and not open ended discussions. Don't allow an executive committee, (usually composed of the officers) to usurp the authority of the board.

Guests – If guests are invited to attend board meetings be sure they understand they must respect the same protocols as the board. A guest with a personal agenda or who interrupts or thinks they have a vote is a significant distraction.

CLOSURE

Rating – Before adjourning ask directors to rate the meeting and suggest ways to improve it. At year end have the board conduct a self-evaluation. The purpose is the process of continuous improvement in governance.



Rate this meeting (ten being the best.) Anything less than 7 please share your suggestions for improvement.

What's Next – Possibly the most important question before ending a board or committee meeting is "what's next?" A quick way recap the commitments and deadlines expected before the next meeting.

Executive Summary – Shortly after board meetings circulate an executive summary that directors can share with chapters and members. The process provides directors consistent messaging to answer, "What did you do at the board meeting?"

Celebrate - Finally, celebrate the achievements of the board. Include their photos on the website and let the community know these are the leaders and visionaries working to improve the profession, cause or community.

Janice Wachtler, executive director at the American College of Osteopathic Emergency Physicians sums it up best, "The secret is that you have to keep the board meeting from being a *bored-meeting*."

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