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Save 200 Hours on Board Meetings

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Are board meetings depleting association resources and staff time? The culprit may be meeting frequency.

Most boards convene quarterly. A few govern only three times a year. Others gather as frequently as monthly.

The most common reason given for meeting often is, "We've always done it this way."

Other rationales: "We like each other and the meeting facilitates the board's networking." And, "If we don't meet monthly the directors will forget what we are working on."

Do the Math

Directors may not realize the impact on staff time.

Assume planning a meeting takes a day of staff time, add the actual meeting time, and then the time needed to wrap up with minutes and follow through.

Meeting monthly can require nearly 200 hours of staff time, annually.

Add to that an executive committee that convenes in between meetings of the board. That can add another 12 meetings for staff to manage.

If there is a subsidiary foundation or PAC, those too require staff time. And many bylaws indicate the executive director or staff must attend every committee meeting.

Before, During and After

Analyze the impact of convening the board in three phases: before, during and after.

Planning requires agenda development in discussions between the chief elected officer and executive director. With the agenda, supportive items must be prepared and distributed. Committees and staff will be asked to submit reports.

Logistics include determining if a quorum will be present. Many meetings include a food and snacks. Copies have to be made. Possibly a hard-copy agenda and board packet is prepared for every director.

Then there is time scheduled for the actual meeting. Add to that the time that directors spend at the office for friendly chats with the CEO or staff. (“While I was here I wanted to ask some questions and get your help.”)

After the meeting, minutes must be prepared and distributed. Tasks will be assigned, tracked and reminders issued. In reality, the wrap up can take more time than the board meeting itself.

Work Life Balance

At AIA Columbus the executive director, Elizabeth Krile, CAE, explains how and why their association transitioned from monthly to bi-monthly meetings.

In 2018, a strategic goal of the board was to increase board engagement. Leadership felt the meetings were too long and “boring” as directors read their committee reports.

Most of the meetings had one action item, approval of the minutes. Meetings lacked robust discussions—and this was happening every month, giving board members a less than stellar volunteer experience.

It was clear the agenda needed to be restructured, but it was not until we reviewed the AIA membership survey results did we realize we might be meeting too often. A clear theme in the survey was the desire for work-life balance.

We were expecting board members to meet every month, plus attend monthly lectures, committee meetings, continuing education programs, and executive committee meetings if an officer. We were burning out our board members and, once again, giving them an unsatisfactory experience. It was too much

Although there was a desire to change, there was the issue of tradition. The board had met monthly for decades. This alone was a challenge, but through the strong leadership of the president and officers, we “piloted” a bi-monthly meeting schedule in 2018 that continues today.

With a combination of a restructured agenda and a bi-monthly schedule, meetings are now focused on higher-level strategic issues. Directors are fully engaged and energized at the meetings.

So far, the feedback has been extremely positive. Although we continue to “tweak” the schedule, I believe we will not return to the monthly meetings any time soon.

Summary

Be analytical about the time and costs associated with board meetings. Does the return on investment and outcomes merit monthly meetings?

If in doubt, read the last few sets of meeting minutes to determine what significant results occurred. Do results advance the mission and strategic plan? Many board meetings are called to read and listen to reports.

Can an agenda be created to cover necessary items for 60 to 90 days, eliminating the need for convening every 30 days? Can the same amount of work be accomplished by convening less often?

Discuss the frequency with officers and directors. The savings for staff and directors can be significant. If the trial doesn’t work after a year, then return to monthly meetings.

For most associations, if there is work to be done between meetings of the board, the executive committee can be convened. Or through technology, a conference call can be made to get the board’s input and consensus.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com. Thanks to Elizabeth Krile, CAE, executive director of AIA Columbus in Ohio for sharing her board’s transition.