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Taming Committee Reports at Board Meetings

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Committee reports can use up valuable time at board meetings. Directors sit through a litany of reports and updates; the average is 15 to 17 per meeting.

Too often they start with, “Our committee didn’t really meet but I can give you an update on how we’re doing...” (There goes another 15 minutes!)

Listening to or reading reports is *not* good governance. Below we have described three ways to tame committee reports at board meetings.

Purpose of Committees

Committees, and your committee structure, can be an asset or a detriment.

Committees are intended to support and supplement the efforts of the board and staff. They may be identified as standing committees (per the bylaws) or task forces (short term assignments). They should produce results that advance the association’s mission and strategic plan.

A productive committee will be key to moving the association forward by producing beneficial results. A rogue committee can get an organization in hot water for what they say or do.

A strong committee structure will engage members and prepare leaders. A weak committee structure can disengage and discourage volunteers, especially if meetings are poorly planned and executed or, worse yet, a call for volunteers is ignored.

The Problem with Reports and Updates

Listening to and discussing reports uses an inordinate amount of the limited, precious time directors have to focus on their real work—advancing the association’s mission and strategic plan, serving stakeholders, and properly using and protecting resources.

Committee reports should communicate how their recommendations and actions support or supplement the board’s work.

Several Solutions

There are several approaches to respecting the reports without losing valuable director time.

Consent Agenda – Using a consent agenda is an efficient meeting practice that groups the routine reports into a single agenda item. The reports are distributed and expected to be read *in advance* of the board meeting.

Since most reports are for informational purposes and do not request action, the bundle can be accepted by a single motion, “to accept as distributed.” This leaves time for more substantive discussions, often saving hours.

Establish a policy for directors to ask questions or request discussion about something in a report. e.g., 72 hours prior to the meeting; or, only prior to the consent agenda vote (limit allowable time).

Committee items that require action or approval can be voted on separately.

Firm Approach – The chief elected officer establishes non-negotiable content and deadline expectations for reports and updates and remains firm about them. Require that committee chairs submit reports by a pre-established date and that they include only the information that you define. Ask directors to read reports before the meeting. Design consequences (that sting) for missing deadlines.

If highlights of the reports need to be heard at the meeting, require chairs to get prior approval and then set time limits, such as two minutes per report. Watch out for the report that begins with, “I just want to say...” or, “I don’t know if this is for the whole board, but...”

Reporting Framework – Reports, whether oral or written, can be unnecessarily lengthy. Provide a framework for committee reports, keeping in mind the adage that brief is better. Emphasize the importance of reporting only need-to-know details and those required by the association bylaws or procedures.

Included is a sample template that details the basic reporting info, plus a reporting table combining the agenda, performance measures, and status. Similar to a project

Association
XX Committee/TF/Group
Meeting Report

Meeting Date:	Location:	Start Time:	End Time:
MEMBERS/ATTENDANCE			
Chair:	Present?		
Co-Chair:	Yes No		
	Yes No		
	Yes No		
	Yes No		
	Yes No		
	Yes No		
	Yes No		

AGENDA	Action Required?	Action Taken
Welcome, Introductions, and Mission Reminder <i>Ensure everyone knows each other. Do a simple icebreaker if it will be beneficial (e.g. what book are you reading? If you travel anywhere, where would you go?). Read the association mission (below) and remind members this is your north star.</i>	no	
Objective for this meeting <i>What is the primary purpose for this meeting? What do you want to accomplish?</i>	no	
Item 1 – XX		
Status:		
Action requested:		
Follow up required and by whom:		
Due date:		
Item 2 – XX		

Association Mission =
Association Vision =
Association Values =
Committee Mission =
<i>this committee's primary responsibility in furthering the mission of the association</i>

management report, this allows issues and tasks to be easily reported and tracked over time.

After the Reports

The board of directors has oversight of committees and their progress. If a committee is not fulfilling expectations, determine why and then train, redirect, refocus and/or reappoint. Don't waste time hoping it will come around.

If a committee regularly submits reports that do not reflect substantive actions, it's time to reconsider the mission or value of that committee. Perhaps it's a standing committee that is no longer relevant, or a task force that has fulfilled its primary goal and needs to be disbanded.

Instead of mourning the loss of the committee or its members, have a plan that will immediately engage those volunteers in other committees, a new task force, or a brainstorming group.

With a healthy structure, attentive directors and informed, engage volunteers, association committees will be an effective too for advancing the association's mission.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com. Dana L. Saal, CMP, CAE, is an association coach and consultant. Learn more at www.saalmeetings.com.