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The Case Against Monthly Board Meetings

Bob Harris, CAE

Association executives often ask, “How frequently should the board meet?” The best answer is, “When there is a reason to convene for the purpose of governance.”

The majority of boards meet quarterly. It is ironic that some of America's largest associations get the job done by convening only three times a year.

Inversely smaller associations and chambers find a need to meet monthly or bi-monthly. Why do organizations with small budgets, fewer members or less programs need to meet more frequently?

“Don't be afraid to broach the subject of migrating to quarterly meetings,” says Steve Christian, President, Greater Chambersburg Chamber of Commerce.

“We recently added it to our annual planning session, and initially staff had a lot of anxiety over having the issue placed on the agenda at all. Concerned that it may be perceived as diminishing the role of our board, and changing a decades-old tradition. We were pleasantly surprised at how well it was received by our board members, and the change was approved with minimal debate. This frees up staff time to focus on executing our mission and serving our members.”

Problems

Meet too often and complications arise, including wasted time, micromanagement and a lack of quorums. Here are the symptoms:

Always Done it this Way – We have met monthly for decades. “If we don't have meet often we forget about the projects and our responsibilities. We enjoy the camaraderie.”

Top Brass – Boards want to attract senior decision makers. Monthly meetings, coupled with the duties of chairing committees and attending events, may limit top echelon directors from volunteering. They delegate the opportunity to underlings.

Management – Meetings require staffing. Supporting the board is a key function, including meeting preparation, attendance and wrap up. They invest a lot of time on agenda preparation, distributing reports, meeting attendance, room set-up and meeting minutes.

Socializing – Some directors like the meetings for socializing, seeing friends and exchanging information; not for governance.

Micromanagement – When the board meet without a purpose directors may busy themselves with committee work and micromanagement of staff. Remember the adage, “Directors don’t do committee work at the board table.” Similarly the board should not tackle administrative details.

Solutions

The transition from monthly to quarterly meetings should not be difficult if approached rationally. A few members will grieve about the change but most adjust.

Technology – There are tech tools allowing for notice, on-line meetings, document collaboration, and voting. While in-person meetings are probably best, use technology to streamline governance.

Executive Committee – If the bylaws allow, convene the executive officers instead of the whole board. They may have authority to make decisions in between meetings of the full board.

Agenda Design – Is the agenda designed to carry the organization forward just 30 or 60 days? Craft an agenda that works for 90 days. If an issue arises, the board can meet by conference call or rely on the executive committee.

Orientation – Directors should fully understand the purpose of board meetings and their responsibilities. When they realize their roles, they may agree to meet only as needed. It would be wrong to have directors think the meeting is a time for socializing and lunch.

Postponement – If there is no pressing issue, nor a good reason to meet, postpone the meeting. By calling for input into the agenda, if none is received it may be a sign that the meeting can be postponed. Nobody will be upset about getting more time in their life because a meeting was cancelled.

Find a compromise between the state corporate requirements for at least one meeting a year to meeting monthly. When suggesting change, rely on the governing documents, efficient practices, resource management, precedents and culture to determine what works best for the organization.

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