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## **W.A.I.T., Why am I Talking?** Bob Harris, CAE

Board meetings are platforms for conversation and deliberation. The room is set so directors can see, listen and converse with each other. An agenda keeps the discussions moving forward to achieve the desired outcomes.

It takes discipline, by everyone, to maintain a focus on the business at hand. It is easier to be distracted than it is to stay on topic.

“Paying attention and staying focused is not easy. Directors’ attention may wander. Those who listen with intent will conclude the meeting with improved outcomes,” said Rick Howe, IOM, Director of Visitor Services, Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce.

### **Value the Time**

Board meetings have significant cost. Volunteers and staff are providing time and expertise. Do the outcomes match the value? Members expect leaders to produce results when they are convened for governance.

To determine value, consider the process from start to finish. Preparation starts months in advance. An agenda is developed with the input of officers and staff. Logistics include meeting notice, quorum count and reports prepared.

Attendance may require travel and overnight stays. Directors and staff are away from their usual responsibilities or using personal time to attend.

Estimate the hourly value with a formula. Value each person’s time at \$100 minimum. From start to finish, count the number of hours, then multiply by the total number of people. For example, 25 persons in a 4-hour meeting has a worth of \$10,000 plus the costs of meeting space, travel costs and time. Multiply the estimate by the number of meetings per year, i.e. \$10,000 x quarterly meetings equal \$40,000.

The cost of agenda digressions or distractions become more apparent. At a 4-hour meeting, it is common for an hour to be spent for niceties, questions that could have been answered before or after the meeting.

### **W.A.I.T.**

There is an acronym that encourages people to be mindful with their words. WAIT stands for, “Why am I talking?”

The problem: people formulate a response before the speaker finishes the sentence. This cocktail style of conversation is detrimental in the boardroom.

Everyone wants to be heard at a board meeting. You'll recognize the need with the statements, "I have a good idea," and "I just have a question." Both statements tend to distract from the agenda.

## **Group Think**

Another culprit is "group think." An idea generates enthusiasm that takes over the meeting. The motion passes because seemingly everyone is in favor. The motion was not based on knowledge and metrics. It is common to hear, "I voted for it because others were voting that way."

Sometimes silence can be more impactful than talking. Not every question requires an answer. Pondering a problem in silence can have powerful results. Be cognizant of rhetorical questions requiring no response.

## **Meeting Adaptations**

If distractions, side-bar conversations, questions and group think characterize meetings, establish practices to reign in the talking.

- **Awareness** - Determine the cost of convening the board. Discuss the return on investment. Postpone unnecessary meetings. The time of volunteers and staff is irreplaceable.
- **Gavel** - The board chair has authority to decide if comments are pertinent to the agenda. A firm gavel works to advance the agenda.
- **Time Markers** – Add time markers to the agenda. It guides directors as to how much time is allocated for a discussion. For instance, approval of the chair's report might be listed at 5 minutes; it's a problem if it extends to 20 or 30 minutes.
- **Redirect** - Direct misplaced conversations. Create alternative time and space for informal questions and chats. Use a board accessible portal where questions can be addressed.
- **Casual Time** – Schedule time before the meeting for casual chat; provide beverage and space to meet and greet. Direct unrelated ideas and questions to be addressed during the break or after the meeting.
- **Preparation** - Directors who arrive unprepared can be the distractors. Mandate that directors read materials and address questions in advance --- it is a fiduciary duty.

- **Right Size** - The IRS suggests the size of the board should allow for meaningful conversations. Be sure room set up and board size is conducive to doing business.
- **Consent** - Move reports to a consent agenda. Rather than listening and approving reports at the meeting, circulate them in advance.
- **Agenda Design** – Craft an agenda that gets the job done. Integrate elements of the strategic plan directly into the agenda. An agenda should address the Goals, Strategies and Priorities (GPS).
- **Rhetorical** – Not all questions are meant to start a conversation. Be alert to rhetorical questions posed just to make the group think.
- **Evaluate** – Before the meeting ends, recap what was accomplished. Ask directors if they have ideas to improve the next board meeting.

Improve meetings by managing distractions and promoting the acronym WAIT - why am I talking?

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and tips at [www.nonprofitcenter.com](http://www.nonprofitcenter.com).