



**Spring 2003**

## **Making Your Board Meetings Count**

Many not-for-profit organizations are facing critical issues, yet budget restrictions may have necessitated less frequent or scaled back meetings. Fortunately, several measures are available to increase the effectiveness of these meetings.

### **Before the Meeting**

The frequency and location of board meetings should be settled well in advance. Other steps can be taken closer to the meeting to facilitate its effectiveness.

For example, considerable meeting time can be saved by preparing all proposed board resolutions before the meeting. In addition to saving time, this avoids the difficulties inherent in a "too many cooks" drafting situation.

Agendas should also be prepared in advance, which includes setting timetables for discussing each item. An "anticipated action" should follow each item on the agenda, such as "approve resolution to increase funding."

The agenda shouldn't include items that won't be discussed (e.g., committee reports), simply to recognize that a committee has done some work. Instead, the report can be inserted in the board packet and referred to briefly during the meeting.

Finally, the board members should receive their packets with enough time to review the materials before the meeting, typically at least two weeks. The packet should include the agenda, written reports of past actions, any proposed resolutions, financial statements, budget-to-actual reports, and a memo of discussion items from the president or presiding officer.

### **At the Meeting**

Small things can make a big difference. Ensure that every attendee wears a name tag at each meeting — often someone will be in attendance who can't identify all the other attendees.

An acronym chart can also be very helpful — for maximum effect, post a list of frequently used acronyms, both in the organization and in the relevant industry, where everyone can easily read it.

Another small but crucial piece of housekeeping is having a comfortable setting, with ample seating, well-regulated temperatures, and light refreshments or, at a minimum, pitchers of water.

One key to an effective board meeting is participation by every attendee. This can be a struggle to accomplish, but the meeting leader should see that every attendee contributes at least one comment at each meeting.

Similarly, communication with staff at a board meeting should be two-way. If a staff presentation doesn't require a response from the board, it can be taken care of in a written report included in the board packet. The greatest portion of time at a board meeting should be used to discuss future issues.

### **Discussion Items**

Inevitably, discussion of some items will run over the time allotted on the agenda. To preclude a domino-effect of delay, these items should be referred to a committee for study and recommendation or tabled until the next scheduled meeting.

Disagreements may also be inevitable. Where possible, these should be resolved outside the meeting. In the case of more serious disputes, someone on the board will need to assume the role of mediator.

In either situation, respect for all positions must be maintained, with emphasis placed on presenting a united front publicly. When the meeting adjourns, only one position should be presented — the one which the majority of the board approved.

While minutes are certainly important, most minute takers are far more detailed than necessary. It's not necessary to record every comment made, by whom, to whom, and when.

In fact, discussions should not even be documented — only the final resolution needs to be noted in the minutes. Where reports have been made, the minutes can include a brief summary of the salient points to establish a record of the information on which the board acts.

The meeting chair should make every attempt to adjourn as scheduled. If the meeting seems likely to run past the scheduled adjournment, the chair should ask the attendees, about 15 minutes beforehand, how they would like to proceed.

### **After the Meeting**

Staff can send the board members e-mail reminders of their assignments from the meeting. A newsletter or other regular communication will increase the cohesiveness of the group and keep their responsibilities on their radar.

Many not-for-profits also have found it valuable to distribute an anonymous survey or evaluation on a periodic basis after board meetings. Questions should address a scope of issues, including likes and dislikes about the particular meeting, satisfaction with agenda items, and suggestions for increasing participation in, and effectiveness of, the meetings.

### **Meeting by Phone**

Although they may seem easier to organize, telephone meetings should be avoided. other than when the board must act quickly. Effective board meetings

require access to too many board members and staff to be conducted smoothly by phone.

Phone meetings tend to discourage in-depth discussion, interaction, and deliberation and diminish the impact of live presentations. Boards should make an effort to resort to the phone only when truly necessary.

The advent of sophisticated, interactive Internet-based "virtual meeting" programs can provide an alternative meeting forum when getting everyone together physically is not possible.



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