

Productive Meetings

Board meetings are where the work of the board is accomplished, making it critical that those meetings are intentional, strategic, and productive. By planning ahead and focusing on good process before, during, and after the meeting, you can create more effective, productive, and **strategic meetings**.

Setting the Meeting Agenda

The agenda is the recipe for the meeting. It is the tool for the chair to help guide the discussion and a reminder for the members to stay focused. For better meetings, be sure the agenda:

- Is distributed at least one week before meeting.
- Includes questions to frame thinking.
- Identifies what board action is required.
- Inclusive of a **consent agenda**, leaving more time for constructive debate.
- Connects the strategic plan; focuses on big issues.
- Indicates which items are for discussion and which ones are simply informative.
- Separates strategic issues, generative questions, resource items, and operational matters. Color-coding each may help.

- Starts with the most important questions. Indicate time limits for agenda items.
- Considers ending each meeting with a summary of action items, a reminder of what is to be held in confidence, and a brief **meeting** effectiveness survey.

Prior to the meeting

Without due preparation, your meetings may end up as aimless get-togethers. Make sure that before the meeting the following tasks have been accomplished. Think of other creative ways to get your board members ready. Advance preparation improves meeting process.

- Send the agenda and attachments to all board members before the meeting and, if possible, at least one week before the meeting. Color-code items by action, such as different colors for information sharing, brainstorming, deliberation, and deciding.
- Include all written reports describing past actions (last meeting minutes, committee reports) as part of a consent agenda. Assign a contact person for questions and clarifications for consent agenda items.
- Allow time for information gathering and information sharing
- Make a habit of having social time before or after, as well as time for board development. Possible topics include the responsibilities of a board member or how to read financial statements.
- Consider including a memorandum or a cover page from the chief executive listing issues for discussion.
- If necessary, send reminder emails or make personal phone calls reminding everyone of the upcoming meeting and their assignments.
- Board members: Read the material sent to you. Come to the meeting prepared. Be ready to participate.

During the meeting

Board meetings need to be managed and documented. The board chair is tasked with facilitating an engaging and productive meeting. The board secretary or a designee is tasked with documenting the meeting attendance, motions, and actions of the board.

Here are some ways to energize your meetings:

- Build a **Culture of Inquiry**
- Create a code of conduct for board meetings: No personal attacks allowed. Differing opinions respected.
- Ensure quorums and voting aligns with the bylaws.
- Change the layout of the room regularly to initiate interaction and contact between different board members. If you have a large board, think of how you can lay out the room to allow for small-group discussions.
- Use graphic displays, visuals, or dashboards as much as possible to keep all participants actively engaged and focused on the same issue.
- Have themed meetings when applicable. Serious issues warrant additional time for discussion, such as fundraising, liability issues, outreach, or board composition.
- Bring in experts to add an outsider's view. Rely on staff for information when discussing programs.
- Try to avoid overly structured and procedural meetings. Allow time for constructive and free discussion and deliberation.
- Design a colorful Stop! sign for board members to use when they have a question. It is a less intimidating way to interrupt a speaker. Having a designated "parking lot" of ideas is also a great way to capture ideas to revisit when time allows or at a future meeting.
- Integrate evaluation of the meeting in the schedule. Use index cards for questions and comments, have everyone complete a short questionnaire before leaving the meeting room, or have a different board member observe the meeting and provide comments afterwards. Change the evaluation format regularly.
- Consider including an executive session, with and without the chief executive on a regular basis, and a process to inform the chief executive of the discussion.

Between meetings

Keep board members informed between the meetings.

- E-mail a list of assignments to each board member; send a copy to the chair.

- Have each committee chair check in with their committee members on assignments; copy the chair and the chief executive.
- Have the chair or another contact person get in touch with board members who did not attend the meeting to discuss the meeting.
- Update board members regularly through a newsletter of some sorts of on what is happening between meetings, including results of meeting action items, share press clippings, personal news items, or any other material that keeps the organization in board members' thoughts.

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Resource: [Meeting, and Exceeding Expectations: A Guide to Successful Nonprofit Board Meetings](#)