

12 Ways to Liven Up Your Board Meetings —and Your Board

If your board meetings are regarded as an unpleasant obligation, it's time to bring a fresh perspective: board meetings are an opportunity to exchange ideas, resolve issues and deepen commitment.

Here are 12 tried-and-true ways to rethink your approach and create meetings that bring out your board's best.

1) Focus the agenda on results.

Look for ways to structure real discussions among board members that will elicit commitment and leadership. Decide what is needed most out of this meeting, set your agenda accordingly and tell your board members at the beginning of the session why they are present and what you need out of them: “By the end of this meeting, we need to accomplish x, y, and z.” That will get their attention.

2) Be creative with the agenda.

Look for ways to tweak the meeting plan to evoke your board members' passion for your cause. Avoid a dry recital of figures, and instead humanize your discussions by giving the board insight to what the agency is really accomplishing out in the world.

For a more radical approach, occasionally throw out the agenda altogether! Let the board create its own order of business by consensus at the beginning of the meeting. That way everyone is immediately paying more attention to the work that needs to get accomplished in the meeting. They are not just meeting for routine reporting and discussing; action needs to be taken on real issues now.

3) Focus on problems, challenges, or broad issues.

Discussions of this nature will activate your board members' various backgrounds and skills sets, not to mention their interest. It will allow you to draw upon a deeper reservoir of their talent and energy, and will give them more interesting work.

4) Look at trends within routine reports.

Identify larger, big-picture issues that are reflected within routine reports. For example, along with the financial report, consider a discussion of long-run implications of certain revenue or cost trends. What are three important questions anyone might want to ask about this month's financial report? Identify these questions yourself and introduce them to the board as discussion topics.

Also, along with the regular fundraising report, you could schedule a big-picture discussion of the pros and cons of a subject, such as fundraising events, which we know to be high cost and effort while providing a lower financial return than cultivating major donors. Or you might have the board brainstorm ways to double the funds raised from the annual event. (Wouldn't you love to hear your board grapple with that one?)

5) Plan big.

Bring big-picture strategic planning issues into regular board meetings. For example, you could take the standard strategic planning issues focusing on organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis). Divide the four subjects over four board meetings and at each meeting, take your board through a discussion or update of one of these issues.

6) Look at your board meetings as cheerleading sessions.

Get ready to fire up your board members and put them into action. For these meetings, switch your view to seeing the board as the team that is out on the field, with the role of the staff being there to encourage and congratulate them: How would you stage such a session? Identify who would need to speak in order to rev up the energy of your board.

7) Use consent agendas.

Why devote valuable meeting time to routine business items that do not require much board discussion? A list of items can be mailed out in advance and approved in one vote. Any member can ask that a consent agenda item be moved back into the regular agenda for discussion. Try handling committee reports in this manner by providing written reports in the place of lengthy oral reports.

8) Interview the Executive Director.

Occasionally consider allowing time for the board members to interview the executive director about what is on his/her mind. What keeps the director up at night? How about a relaxed "fireside chat" with him or her for about 10 minutes at each meeting? What an interesting discussion this could be and how engaging for board members.

9) Always choose one interesting item and set it up for a discussion.

If you are nervous about turning your board loose and are not sure where the discussion might go, then let a couple of trusted board members know in advance about the planned discussion. Tell them your perspective and what you need from the board's conversation on this issue.

10) Select a theme for each meeting.

Follow the advice of the Alliance for Peacebuilding CEO, Chic Dambach, who likes to select a theme for each meeting based a particular need or issue facing the organization. He says, “This allows ample time for in-depth analysis of that topic. For particularly important issues, the theme can be repeated over the course of several meetings until the issue has been adequately addressed.”

11) Create “mission moments” in every board meeting.

Give your trustees a personal experience of your mission in action. Use a testimonial or a story about someone touched by your organization. This could be the most powerful subject of the entire meeting.

12) Break into groups.

Instead of reporting to board members about an upcoming challenge, present the issue as a question and ask them to discuss it in small groups. Then the board chair can facilitate the full group discussion afterwards. Having small groups enables everyone to speak, encouraging shy people, those who typically avoid speaking to the full board, to participate.

