

Board Development

Meetings that Work

On average a board of directors of a not-for-profit organization will meet as one group less than 30 hours over the course of a year. In this time the board must approve budgets, hear committee reports, monitor and evaluate policy as well as the senior staff, and still find time to develop future plans. There is no time to waste!

Characteristics of Time Wasters

The following characteristics are what people use to describe meetings which waste their time:

- ✗ There is no agenda. The agenda is not followed.
- ✗ Material for the meeting is not given out ahead of time.
- ✗ Little gets accomplished.
- ✗ More than one person talks at once.
- ✗ Some participants dominate the discussion.
- ✗ The meeting goes longer than scheduled.
- ✗ Not everyone participates.

If these characteristics describe your board meetings, then it's time for a fresh start at the next meeting. A common complaint about meetings is that, although there is a lot of discussion, few concrete results emerge. Usually the most enjoyable meetings are also the ones that are the most efficient and productive. At the next board meeting, try using this check list as a stepping off point to board meetings that really work.

- ✓ Leadership
- ✓ Participants
- ✓ Purpose
- ✓ Agenda
- ✓ Minutes
- ✓ Background
- ✓ Meeting time and place

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Board Development: Meetings that Work

“Leadership is action, not position.”

*Donald A.C. McGannon,
Making Meetings Matter,
Alberta Community Development
1993*

Leadership

The chairperson of the board is an important and pivotal role. The chairperson is in a prime position to change the direction of any meeting. It is the chairperson’s role to make sure the business of the board is carried out within the designated time. The chairperson sees that all recommendations are moved, voted upon and recorded.

The chairperson keeps the discussion on topic and discourages sidebar conversations or hogging of the discussion. The chairperson makes sure that all board members understand the purpose of the board meetings and the reason for agenda items. Training and orientation of board members on this subject is important.

The chairperson insists that all reports are sent out ahead of time and are read before the meeting. Time consuming detail work is handled in committees. The chairperson steers the board away from re-doing the work of committees at the board meeting.

The chairperson does not let the meeting drag. He/she is prepared to ask people to come back to another meeting with their reports if they are not ready or off topic. The chairperson cuts off discussions that are off topic or going in circles.

Participants

Board members have a responsibility to block time to attend board meetings. They find out where and when the meeting is scheduled to take place. In the interest of common courtesy they call to confirm their attendance or absence with the chairperson. They know their role in helping the meeting to reach its objectives. They do their homework so they can participate fully. They avoid sidebar conversations, off topic conversations or dominating the meeting time. Board members take notes so that they can be aware of the issues as well as remember what they agreed needed to be done.

Purpose

Before any and all meetings, board members should be able to answer the questions, “What are we going to resolve or accomplish?”

In a nutshell there are three kinds of reports that are processed at a board meeting: for **information**; for **discussion, referral or tabling**; or for **decision and action**.

Items presented **for information** are intended to keep the board informed about ongoing matters, but do not require immediate action from the board.

Items presented **for discussion, referral or tabling** may require further input before a final recommendation for decision and action can be made.

Examples are committee and staff reports which need clarification before they return with concrete proposals, or before a decision can be made.

Some items are presented **for decision and action** in order for a board to accomplish results. These items may be a result of previously referred or tabled items, or they may be those that can be dealt with after the first review. Some items may mean action of an immediate nature by the board, such as offering a specific program; other items may result in recommendations to others.

Agenda

Who prepares the board meeting agenda? When preparing the agenda for the board's meeting, boards with staff should keep in mind that this is the board's agenda. It is not the staff's list of what the board should do. Even if the staff do prepare the agenda, board members should not be shut out of the process.

Poor meetings can result from poor agendas. Some boards spend forty-five minutes debating which coffee urn to buy for the board and ten minutes discussing the annual budget. Do board members arrive at meetings unprepared because they do not have the right information? Is your agenda a list of points with no indication of what is to be accomplished? If any of these sound familiar, an illustrative agenda may be of help.

An illustrative agenda gives a complete picture of what is expected at the meeting. Board members also leave with a record of what happened so they can get started immediately on any assignments.

| AN EXAMPLE OF AN ILLUSTRATIVE AGENDA | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|--|------------------------|---|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Meeting: _____ | | | | | | |
| Date: _____ | | | | | | |
| Time: _____ | | | | | | |
| Place: _____ | | | | | | |
| Timing | Details Agenda Items | Action Required (Decision,* Discussion, Information) | Who is Responsible? | Resource Materials e.g. Reports, Budget | Outcome/ What Happened? | Follow-up Action Who/ When? |
| | | | | | | |

* **Decision making items should have a corresponding motion to be voted upon.**

Board Development: **Meetings that Work**

“A meeting is effective when it achieves its objectives in a minimum amount of time to the satisfaction of the participants.”

Marion E. Haynes
Effective Meeting Skills.
1988

Board Development: Meetings that Work

Minutes

Minutes of the meeting should be available as soon as possible after the meeting. The purpose of the minutes is to:

- ☞ provide a permanent record of the proceeding of a meeting;
- ☞ keep track of progress;
- ☞ inform absent members;
- ☞ help in the orientation of new members to the organization;
- ☞ provide a useful guide for evaluating an organization's work.

Sample Agenda

| | |
|--|---|
| ANYWHERE SOCIETY DIRECTOR'S MEETING January 11, 20xx - 8:00 p.m. Anywhere Community Centre | |
| AGENDA | |
| 1. Welcome | |
| 2. Minutes of last meeting | |
| 3. Old Business. | 3.1 - Proposal re: date change of spring fair |
| 4. New business. | 4.1 - Delegates to Directors' workshop 4.2 - Report from Promotions committee 4.3 - |
| 5. Future agenda | |
| 6. Date of next meeting | |
| 7. Adjourn - 10:30 p.m. | |

Samples from handout: *Meetings Don't Just Happen* by N. Geleynse and R. Black, Edmonton Parks and Recreation, Rural Organizations and Services Branch. Publication date unknown.

Sample Minutes

| | |
|---|---|
| MINUTES OF THE ANYWHERE SOCIETY DIRECTOR'S MEETING January 11, 20xx - 8:00 p.m. Anywhere Community Centre | |
| 1. The meeting was called to order by Chairperson, Mr. A., who welcomed all those present. Absent with notification, Mr. B. | |
| 2. Minutes of the December 6th, 20xx meeting were read, corrected and accepted. | |
| 3. Old business. | |
| 3.1 | MOTION: Mrs. C./Mr. D. that the date of the spring fair be changed to Victoria Day weekend. Discussion |
| DEFEATED | |
| 4. New business | |
| 4.1 | MOTION: Mr. E./Mr. F. that Anywhere Society send three delegates to the "Roles and Responsibilities of Society Directors" Workshop. |
| CARRIED | |
| 4.2 | Promotions Committee reported that... |
| 4.3 | |
| 5. Future agenda: | |
| a) | finalize plans for spring fair |
| b) | sponsorship of local clubs |
| c) | report from toy show committee |
| 6. Next meeting - February 18, 20xx. 8:00 p.m. at the Anywhere Community Centre. | |
| 7. Meeting adjourned at 10:15 p.m. | |
| Chairperson: _____ | Secretary: _____ |

The 80/20 Rule

The majority of an agenda should focus on policy and long term planning issues facing the organization. A general rule of thumb to follow is the 80/20 rule. Eighty per cent of the agenda should be future orientated in discussion, debate and decision making. Twenty percent should be reports that help you make long term decisions. Have a close look at the agenda to assess whether you are ready for the meeting and whether or not the 80/20 rule is applied.

Background

The primary purpose of board meetings is to make decisions concerning the future direction of the organization. Be prepared to attend a meeting with the materials read, your report ready, and a draft motion if you intend to make a motion.

Meeting Time and Place

Each board member is responsible for knowing the date, time and location of the meeting. If you are having attendance problems at board meetings, have board members call and remind other board members several days prior to the meeting. This gentle nudge may be all that is needed to get them there. Reconsider if this task has been assigned to staff members. Board members tend to respond better to other board members.

Meeting Tips

Do start the meeting on time. Reward punctuality.

Avoid automatically covering ‘old business’ at every meeting. Cover only those areas that need to be addressed on the agenda.

Do make the meeting fun and informative as well as productive.

Put important issues needing debate early in the agenda. This allows people to respond when they are still fresh.

Enforce attendance. Decide on a policy that fits your board and stick with it. Absentee board members, no matter the cause, do not help get the board’s work done.

Set a time limit for board meetings and stick to it. Negotiate any time extensions of the board meeting.

Do have a brief verbal summary at the end of the meeting outlining what was accomplished.

What is in the Bylaws about Meetings?

From time to time it is good strategy to check your bylaws in the section that deals with meetings. This allows you as an organization to stay grounded in your founding constitution. As well, a regular review means that you can keep on top of any changes that are needed.

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“Parliamentary procedure is a tool, not a weapon, to be used in conducting a meeting in a civilized manner. Knowledge of the system is not to be flaunted or used to confuse procedure.... remember that the reason for the meeting is to make decisions...not debate the proper methods of carrying out the decision-making process.

- Brian Staples
1988



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Something to Think About

Making a Motion

Many board members do not like to make motions and for very good reasons. They are concerned that the motion may be too vague and open to interpretation. They worry that it may be too specific and not accomplish its intended purpose. In certain cases, poor wording can even mean legal difficulties. Here are some tips for making motions easier for everyone.

- Draft your motions before the meeting.
- Ask your chairperson or executive director for help when writing the motion to ensure it is relevant and possible.
- Clarify each motion before voting. Before it is passed have the motion repeated and make sure that it is recorded correctly.
- Examine the minutes before you approve them to ensure the motion was recorded correctly.
- Remember your minutes are the official record of the board's actions.
- Seek assistance from a lawyer or other professional when wording is critical.

Suggested Resources:

Perry, Herb. Call to Order: Meeting Rules and Procedures for Non-Profit Organizations. Owen Sound, Ontario: Big Bay Publishing. 2001. www.bigbaypublishing.ca

Robert, Henry M. III, William J. Evans, Daniel H. Honemann, Thomas J. Balch. Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised In Brief. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press. 2004. www.robertsrules.com

Standard, Geoffrey. Bourinot's Rules of Order, Fourth Edition. Toronto, Ontario. McClelland & Stewart. 1996.