

Do your Board meetings seem to go on forever without really getting to the point? Are people stealing out before the end, or not showing up at all? Are you having trouble maintaining a quorum? Do your Board meetings happen and then nothing happens afterward? Sometimes Board meetings get so deadly for Board members that they figure no-one will miss them if they're not there and don't pay attention afterwards. Here are some suggestions for shaking up your Board meetings and making them lively and engaging – and fun!

NOTE: While it may take up to a year for all of following recommendations to be implemented fully, the very process of applying these recommendations will raise the level of Board involvement in and of itself. It is usually part of the ongoing responsibility of the Board Governance Committee to put these recommendations into action and adjust them as appropriate.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENLIVENING PARTICIPATION IN BOARD MEETINGS

BOARD MEETING PREPARATION

Prepare and pre-distribute more information which includes a focus on thought-provoking materials, and get these materials out earlier (a week before the Board meeting). Do the agency's informative reporting through the materials so that the meeting itself can focus on substantive discussion.

Create an agenda that is designed to maximize Board action. Organize the agenda around action items. For each agenda item, ask: "What are we asking the Board to do in this area?" If the answer is: "Nothing, we just thought they should know about this" – then put it in a written report and ask for questions at the meeting.

BOARD MEETING PARTICIPATION

Do not take up meeting time recapitulating written reports. Refer to them, ask for questions, and then focus on a substantive area of discussion or Board decision that must be made.

Use a variety of participation strategies to encourage discussion – break up into working groups, pairs, small groups, do participatory exercises, etc. Consciously add one or two strategies like this to every meeting agenda.

Focus on governance issues as part of the agenda. Get the Board thinking about itself and what it needs to do to run functionally.

Set up the room in a way that maximizes contact and engagement and minimizes the opportunity to zone out.

Build in time for Board-to-Board social interaction. Build bonds between Board members.

Re-think the timing of meetings so that people can get there on time, focus, and then go home at what they feel is a reasonable time. Do less at meetings (especially less reporting), and more by mail, phone and email (and in committee meetings).

Include ongoing programmatic education in every Board meeting. Consider having senior staff members address the Board to explain the issues involved in particular programs. Make the programs live for the Board even if they can't consistently attend programmatic functions.

At each meeting, refer to the organization's strategic plan and vision as current programmatic issues are discussed so that people get a reminder of WHY we're doing what we're doing, not just WHAT is happening.

Use Board meetings as opportunities to keep Board members informed on issues related to programmatic concerns. Think of Board members as the agency's advocates and keep them up-to-date on the issues in the field that are impacting on the agency.

Hand out Board member assignments at every meeting. Use the full Board meeting time to get commitments from Board members as to who will do what. Not every Board member needs to get an assignment at every meeting, but meetings should be a place where people volunteer – or are volunteered – to do the work of the agency's Board. Create a climate of participation when Board members know that they, and other Board members, will be called upon and that, to the extent possible, they will rise to the occasion.

BOARD MEETING FOLLOW-UP

Have someone call a member who has missed a meeting to tell them about it. Board meetings should not be optional, but should be places where you have missed something important if you're not there. Call people when they're not there to keep them in the loop and inform them of what they've missed.

Distribute Board minutes in a timely fashion and make them useful. Minutes should focus on decisions that got made and assignments that were handed out. Rather than a recapitulation of reports delivered (which Board members will have gotten in advance), minutes should be a spur to Board and staff action.

Follow-up on Board member assignments through the minutes, Board Buddies, and Board management system. Find out if someone is having trouble completing their assignment before it is due. Support them if their ability to follow-through changes. Thank them if they have completed their assignments.

OTHER

Rethink the timing of the annual meeting and also of the annual Board retreat, if necessary. Poll Board members to determine the most opportune times of year and times of day.

Rethink the relationship of the committee meetings and the full Board meeting so that committees can take on independent assignments and report to the full Board from personal participation in the work of the agency (as opposed to simply repeating what the staff has told them).