

# Ten Proven Ideas for Better Board Meetings



Here are some suggestions for how to significantly improve the standard “business oriented” board meeting.<sup>1</sup> Some will be familiar ideas, some not. They all work!

1. Ensure that board members have minutes, reports and a proposed agenda at least several days in advance and that the expectation that they be read in advance is understood.
2. Spend some time planning the agenda. This should be done by the Chair and Executive Director (if you have a staff person who is in such a position) or by the Executive Committee (which usually includes the Executive Director). The goal should be to limit the meeting agenda to six, seven or eight items and to take note of how much Board time might need to be devoted to each one.<sup>2</sup>
3. If your organization is focused on achieving particular objectives for the year or there are one or two “strategic issues” you are working on, build each meeting agenda around one or two of these items.
4. Determine what is to be on the agenda by reviewing each possible item to determine if it needs to be considered at all by the board (i.e. is it a governance or operational matter?). If you think the board should see it, consider whether it is an item for discussion and decision or really just for board information it and does not need to be discussed.<sup>3</sup>
5. Allot a specific amount of time for each item and indicate this on the agenda. You can do this when you are planning the agenda or you can assign priorities and times with the board’s input when reviewing the agenda at the start of every meeting.
6. Build some time into the agenda for enhancing affiliation between board members. This should be done at the beginning and is not the same as informal “networking time”. Connecting at a more personal level will improve the quality of conversation and decision making. You can do this by posing a question to all that requires board members to share something about themselves.<sup>4</sup>
7. Share some food! Having a pot of coffee on and a plate of cookies or a dish of candy on the table is good for setting a positive atmosphere. Supper time or breakfast meetings, if there are resources to provide pizza or muffins are a “perk” that works very well for some boards in helping create an upbeat social and working atmosphere.

8. Do not get too caught up in the use of parliamentary procedures.<sup>5</sup> For important decision items (e.g. minutes, budget and policy approvals) rely on motions and votes. For information and discussion items (e.g. Executive Directors report, financial report) it may be sufficient to ‘go around’ and see if people have questions.
9. Avoid meeting agendas that routinely include the presentation and discussion of committee reports. If reports are for board information they do not need to be on the agenda. If a report does not raise important issues or require a policy decision but you want the minutes to show that the board has seen it, the Chair should ask: “Are there any items in this report that anyone feels needs Board discussion? If not, could I have a motion to accept the report?”
10. In terms of the Executive Director’s report (e.g. one that outlines progress towards objectives, activities and actions, staffing changes and current issues)<sup>6</sup> a board has two choices. The first is to make it a separate agenda item and allot only 15 minutes to it. The second is to eliminate a separate Executive Directors report item and align the report to the key strategic items on the agenda and have the Executive Director speak to each of these in turn. In either case the Executive Director’s written report should be in point form and should highlight the items, if any, which require board attention. The ED should avoid presenting the report but he/she will want to speak to any items that require a board decision or advice.

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<sup>1</sup> Boards ought to consider having some regularly scheduled sessions that totally depart from the usual “business “or “fiduciary” agenda, including strategic planning retreats and meetings with stakeholders. The kind of thinking required for effective oversight is not the same as what is required for more creative, prospective discussion; mixing the two often does not work well.

<sup>2</sup> Four or five items should be regularly on your agenda: review and approval of the agenda; approval of minutes of the previous meeting; financial report, report of the executive director, and, possibly, other business. While it is good to follow up on actions decided at the previous meeting, keep in mind that “business arising from the minutes”, “new business” and “old business” are not strategic or mission-focused agenda items. Take “correspondence” off the agenda as an item; if correspondence needs to be seen by the board, copies should be provided for their information; if correspondence is to the board and requires a board response, and then the matter should be on the agenda in its own right.

<sup>3</sup> Boards need to be informed but not all information distributed to board members needs to be on the agenda. Boards may want to list, below the agenda, information provided to board members “for their information (FYI)”. This might include correspondence, committee reports, job descriptions, notices of staff resignation, and newspaper articles of relevance to the organization.

<sup>4</sup> Some examples of questions that could be used to enhance affiliation include: what is your family history; what is new in your life since we last met, what is one of your most significant childhood experiences, what brought you here (to this board or organization), what characteristics have you inherited from your parents? Work related questions are not as effective as questions about family, children, life experiences and politics in building affiliation.

<sup>5</sup> There are lots of web sites outlining Roberts Rules of Order (U.S.) and similar systems including Bourinot’s Rules of Order (Canada). Do a search for ‘rules of order’, “parliamentary procedure” or “Robert’s Rules”.

<sup>6</sup> If you are operating under John Carver’s Policy Governance Model the Executive Director’s monthly report would include information on progress on key organizational objectives (ends) and strategic initiatives and would be less focussed on activities. Under this model the Executive Director would also be required to submit occasional “Monitoring Reports” on the application of, and adherence to, particular policies.