

Conducting Effective Board Meetings

... It Starts with the Chairman

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We've all walked away from board meetings with a feeling of pleasure because of God's blessing upon the proceedings and a sense of a job well done. Then there are those other board meetings where you leave feeling you or perhaps the entire board had wasted precious time. What is it that makes board experiences so radically different? All board members are responsible for what happens at meetings, but the board chair does play an important role in successful meetings.

Planning the Meeting

Involve the board chair in setting the meeting agenda. Designing an agenda to facilitate accomplishing the business requires a great deal of finesse. Too often, board agendas are constructed by the CEO and the board chair has little if any input into what or how it is presented to the board.

Several weeks before quarterly or semiannual meetings (perhaps one week prior to monthly meetings), the board chair and the CEO should jointly design the agenda—deciding which items need to be reported and which decisions need to be made at the meeting. Review the previous meeting's minutes to

follow up items of concern for the upcoming meeting.

Develop a well-constructed agenda. The design of the agenda will make or break most board meetings. The key is selecting agenda items which require immediate action versus those that could be considered at a later meeting. It is helpful to reflect time values for each agenda item to signal their relative importance. This is also beneficial in managing discussion and decision time during the meeting.

Keep the agenda realistic to avoid rushing action items or frustrating board members because the agenda is not completed within a specific time. Schedule controversial issues early or in the middle of meetings. This will insure adequate discussion time and provide the opportunity to end the meeting on an upbeat note.

Some board meetings always follow a set order of business, e.g., minutes, CEO's report, financial report, committee reports and so on. Consider varying the order to relieve the monotony of a set order.

The agenda should always contain something of true significance—an important item that needs the board's consideration. If a board agenda does not contain significant topics, consider canceling the meeting if this is permitted by the bylaws. If this is a recurring event and the board is

only meeting twice a year, for example, the board is probably too far removed from the organization or is not fulfilling its governance responsibility. If the board is meeting four times a year and lacks substantive meetings, perhaps the board is meeting too often or not doing all it should be doing as a board (see the Commentary for ECFA's Standard #2).

Distribute the agenda and summaries of discussion items in advance. The members should receive the agenda—including all printed reports and reference materials—at least one week prior to the meeting to provide adequate time to review the documents. The packet should contain background information for the meeting. Every sheet of paper in the advance packet should be self-explanatory. While material in the packet may be referenced at the meeting, reports included in the

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packets should not be read at the meeting—doing so simply encourages board members not to read their materials in advance!

Leading the Meeting

Always start with devotions. Setting a spiritual tone for the meeting is essential. Enlist board members to lead devotions. Occasionally encouraging a quiet member to accept this responsibility may help this member be integrated into the group.

Stick with the meeting agenda. Don't be afraid of pushing the agenda. People will respect a chair who starts on time, covers the agenda items that are listed,

and ends on time. This doesn't mean that everyone will be happy when you close off discussion, but they will come to see that over the long haul it serves their interest as well as the organization.

Emphasize brief reports but thorough discussion. If a committee report reflects incomplete work, defer the item until a subsequent meeting to allow the committee to finish its work.

If the agenda item involves a lengthy discussion, the board chair might periodically summarize key points made and note the time remaining before final action.

Avoid debating issues from the chair. The board chair should be careful not to monopolize the meeting. An overbearing chair can be a barrier to a successful meeting. The chair should come to the meeting with a clear view of the chair's role, what needs to be accomplished, and then manage the time to achieve these objectives. The chair should help the group reach the best decisions possible, keeping in mind other agenda items that need board input. Discussion will dissipate when board members find the chair is trying to manipulate them in any way. If the chair wishes to voice a strong opinion about a topic under discussion, it may be most appropriate to ask the vice-chair to preside during that segment of the meeting.

Be insightful about personality differences. Be sure that each board member is equally free to express his or her views. Encourage each board member to contribute at each meeting. The chair may need to ask specific questions of a silent member or simply go around the table and obtain a brief statement on an issue from each member. It may

be helpful for the board chair to record a tally by a board member's name each time the member has contributed. This makes it easy to determine who has not participated in discussions.

Assist the decision-making process. Board members should understand what they are voting upon, debate differences, and then support the final decision. Opposition to decisions results far more from frustration at not being consulted than from disagreement with the decision. For most people on most issues, it is enough to know that their view was heard and considered. Your job as chair is to draw members out. If it is clear that there is lack of consensus or unanimity within the board, it may be appropriate to take a break in the meeting. The board could be assigned to talk out unresolved issues among themselves or have a couple of designated board members bring back an alternate proposal for further discussion.

The chair shouldn't feel the need to bring the group to consensus on each item unless this is the outcome the board desires. When consensus happens, it's wonderful. But when consensus doesn't happen naturally, gaining it could be an inappropriate use of time, and may not be very honest.

Keep the board out of operational issues. One of the board chair's primary responsibilities is steering the board away from the day-to-day operations or administration of the ministry.

Close the meeting. Spend a few minutes near the close of the meeting to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of that meeting. This can be one of the best expenditures of time in preparing

for the next board meeting, and helps to continually improve the governance process.

Be sure to close in prayer. Remember important decisions to be implemented in the ministry, as well as the CEO, staff, and the particular concerns of individual board members.

Summary

Serving on a ministry's board should be a fulfilling and stimulating experience. This tends to happen when the chair plays an important role in planning the meeting, stating and summarizing issues, helping the group stay on the subject, keeping unobtrusively in control, preventing excesses in the discussion method, and knowing when it is time to call for a vote. 