



SEVEN CREATIVE WAYS TO ENERGIZE YOUR BOARD MEETINGS

Spark your board meetings by confounding expectations.

BY MICHAEL MICHALKO

When you conduct board meetings exactly as you always have, the result is comfortable and many times forgettable. Energize your meeting by confounding expectations with the following tactics, exercises, and suggestions.

1 IDEA TICKET. In advance of a board meeting, frame a problem or issue to address. Ask each board member to bring at least one new idea or suggestion about the problem as their ticket of admission to the meeting. Have people write their ideas on index cards, and collect them at the door. No one gets in without a ticket. Start the meeting by reading everyone's contribution.

2 EVERYONE'S A CONSULTANT. Ask each board member to write a current problem or concern on a blank sheet of paper. Examples: "How can we better develop and communicate our mission?" "How can we improve participation in fundraising?" "Is there a better way to get personal financial commitments?" After allowing a few minutes to write out the problems, ask people to pass their problems to the right. Each person reads the problem just received and jots down responses. Have everyone take 60 seconds to respond to the individual sheet and then

pass it to the right again. Keep the process going until all the problems are back where they started. Then share and discuss the ideas.

3 IT'S SHOWTIME. Stagecraft counts for a lot in today's fast-moving, visual world. Think of your board meeting as a theatrical production—with sets (decorated classrooms), props (well-designed materials), costumes, lighting, sound, plot lines (theme), and the president as the director. As the director, the president manipulates the board members' perceptions. The director prods, provokes, encourages, inspires, and challenges the people who feel stuck and stymied. For example, in one meeting, the president wore a football jersey and carried a football. When he asked a question, the manager would throw the ball to the person who volunteered an answer. The walls were decorated with giant goal posts displaying quotes from successful football coaches. To change the topic, the manager would blow a whistle and make a change. At the end of the meeting, each board member received a miniature football as a reminder that they now had to carry the ball into the field.

4 THE SOUND OF SUCCESS. Just as in the movies, music can help set the tone and heighten board members' experience. For example, play soft classical

music when the group is brainstorming for ideas or light jazz during coffee breaks. The sound track doesn't have to be music. You may want to use the sound of roaring crowds to cheer people on when they offer a good idea, laugh tracks to loosen people up when they get uptight, jungle noises when someone becomes too negative, bells and gongs when a consensus is reached, bombs blowing up when ideas are discarded, and so on. The possibilities are endless.

5 TOY WITH SUCCESS. Children do most of their important learning while playing with toys. Toys have a liberating effect in meetings. They're not only fun, and a disarming way to break the ice, but they're also a deceptively powerful way to break down the barriers of adult thinking. Bring a box of toys to the meeting. Just having toys in the room will change the feeling of the meeting and invite people to be more open and playful. Have people choose a toy and give them time to explore it. Then ask them to compare your nonprofit with the toy. For example, how is your nonprofit like a painful of Legos?

6 YOU'RE FIRED. Sometimes, it takes a five-alarm wake-up call to jolt people out of their complacency. At the beginning of the board meeting, ask the members to imagine that they are "fired." Now ask



them to reapply for a board position. This will force them to rethink their knowledge and competencies and, most important, what they need to do to improve. Or, print an imaginary newspaper of the future that announces the dissolution of your nonprofit organization. Then ask your board members to imagine why the organization failed in its mission. It's the element of shock that makes us wake up and see, hear, and experience our world anew.

7 TELL A STORY. Storytelling is one of the oldest ways to teach and transform. Stories and parables allow people to think about things that would be difficult to approach any other way. Storytelling, for example, can help people envision the future they want and how to achieve it. Tell board

members to imagine that they have been voted nonprofit board member of the year. Then, have them take turns speaking to the group, telling what they did and how they did it to earn that honor. Or, ask board members to write out their most ambitious goal for the nonprofit this year. Then, ask them to imagine that the goal has been reached or surpassed. Now, ask each person to give a speech on the specifics of what the organization had to do to achieve it. ■

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