



Improving Board Meetings: 3 steps for Success

**Shockingly few nonprofits have a system for running board meetings.
Use this checklist to see if your organization is one of them — and how to improve.**

By Stan Bazan

Board meetings are crucial because it's here that organizations develop major policies and make life-altering decisions. Yet many nonprofit leaders haven't designed a system for holding effective meetings.

Here's a rundown of three vital steps every board chair should take, along with key activities to perform during each step. You can modify this framework to suit your organization, but don't skip any of the three steps. No matter how informal your meetings are, people will value organization, preparation, and a meeting that runs smoothly.

To see how well you're doing, fill out the checklist in Exhibit 1 on the next page. Then read on to see how you can improve.

Step 1: Prepare.

Develop an agenda, and give it to participants a week or so before the meeting. In your agenda (as summarized in Exhibit 2), be sure to do the following:

- Tell when and where the meeting is being held, why it's being held, who will attend, and how it will be conducted.
- Describe roles, responsibilities, and expectations. The more clearly you convey this information in the agenda, the more likely that board members will be informed participants.
- List agenda topics, including the amount of time to be spent

If people go off on a tangent, ask them how their points relate to the agenda item on hand.

discussing each one. This technique helps the chair give each agenda item proper emphasis. It also helps the meeting planner include an appropriate number of items. Assigning amounts of time to agenda items won't limit creative discussion if you're careful to slate enough time for decision-based items.

- Specify when the meeting will begin and end. Meetings without ending times invite off-the-track discussions and inattention to items at the end of the agenda.
- Assign people to the roles of recorder, notetaker, and facilitator.
- Give board members specific ways to prepare.
- Address logistical issues, such as whether lunch will be provided.
- Emphasize decision making and action planning. A series of lengthy activity reports can be boring and make board members passive observers, not active participants. Therefore, keep reports short.
- Select topics that apply to the board as a whole. Don't include issues that pertain only to a subcommittee or just a few individuals.
- Arrange topics from easiest to

most difficult. If the more complex items can't be resolved, you can continue them in a subsequent meeting.

Get feedback about the agenda from several people before printing the final version. Such input makes participants feel involved and keeps the meeting planner from forgetting important items.

Collect and disseminate information. Distribute documents to be discussed and other supporting materials well in advance (preferably with the agenda, about a week before the meeting). Board members are rightfully frustrated when asked to consider a proposal distributed moments before they meet. When complex documents are to be discussed, provide executive summaries that refer readers to key facts within the full document.

Hold a pre-meeting discussion. Talking with board members before the meeting can help you anticipate issues, hidden agendas, and people's positions. Just take care that no one feels excluded or gets the impression that the "real meeting" already took place. You can allay these concerns by openly acknowledging that you talked beforehand with certain board members because of their special expertise or interest in an issue.

Perform a final check. Did you distribute agendas and supporting

materials seven days in advance? Did you send reminders about the meeting date, time, and place both before and after delivering the agendas? Have you confirmed logistical details such as room reservations, food service, and parking arrangements?

The key tool is the agenda.

Step 2: Conduct the Meeting.

Get the meeting off to a good start. Set a positive tone, making it clear that you're prepared and confident and will actively guide the meeting. Arrive early so that you can greet participants, clarify questions, and check on arrangements such as food service or visual aids.

Begin the meeting on time. Starting meetings after the scheduled time can cause a downward spiral of increasingly late starts and frustration for those who arrive on time.

Once the meeting is officially convened, review the meeting's objectives and agenda. Confirm roles such as notetaker and timekeeper. This way, there's no question about what's going to be accomplished and how the meeting will proceed.

Remind everyone of basic ground rules for the meeting. This reminder can range from a friendly admonition to avoid distracting sidebar conversations to a clarification of Robert's Rules of Order.

Encourage participation. Since the emphasis in board meetings should be on decision making, it's important to encourage a climate conducive to effective group interaction. Promoting a vigorous exchange of varied opinions, perspectives, and alternatives is likely to lead to high-quality decisions. Also, if board members feel they're active participants in a decision, they're more apt to support implementation of that choice. Here are a few techniques to foster participation:

- Have participants introduce themselves if there are any new board members.

Exhibit 1: Checklist for Effective Board Meetings

*How many of these key steps do you perform at every meeting?
Give yourself 3 points for each step you take.*

Preparing for the Meeting:

- Define the purpose of the meeting.
- Specify objectives for the meeting.
- Select appropriate participants.
- Collect relevant information and input.
- Prepare and distribute agenda in advance.
- Write summaries of complex issues to be discussed.
- Select appropriate time and place.
- Set a time limit.
- Allocate time for each agenda item.
- Make sure agenda items apply to everyone.
- Assign specific roles.
- Prepare and distribute materials in advance.
- Arrange for needed equipment.
- Send reminders.
- Hold a pre-meeting discussion.
- Perform final checks on logistics.

Conducting the Meeting:

- Arrive early.
- Start on time.
- Review the meeting's purpose, objectives, and agenda.
- Confirm roles (such as timekeeper).
- Ensure meeting notes are taken.
- Establish ground rules.
- Set a positive tone.
- Encourage participation.
- Keep on track.
- Summarize key points.
- Summarize decisions reached.
- Agree on actions (who will do what, when).
- Schedule next meeting.
- End on time.

Following Up After the Meeting:

- Distribute meeting notes within 48 hours.
- Provide information on next meeting.
- Follow up on action items.
- Critique the meeting.

Your Meeting Score:

1-36 : Poor: You need to rethink the way you plan and run your meetings. **37-63: Mixed:** Read this article carefully and make needed changes. **64-93: Good:** You're on the right track. Make adjustments to streamline the process. **94 or More: Excellent:** Congratulations! You have the right process in place to engage your board members and make good decisions. Make refinements based on this article, and keep up the good work.

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Avoid jargon or acronyms that everyone may not understand.
- If a few people are dominating a discussion, solicit input from others.
- Promote spirited but collegial debate to examine all sides of issues being discussed.

Stay on track and in control. The key tool here is the agenda. Refer to the agenda to focus the discussion and keep it a reasonable length. If people go off on a

tangent, ask them how their points relate to the agenda item on hand. If an issue comes up that is important and interesting yet unrelated to the agenda, a good technique is to post it on a flip chart for discussion at a future meeting. Having someone other than the chair serve as a timekeeper is also invaluable in staying on track.

The issue of how firmly to control a meeting is always tricky. You need to keep on task, but you

continued on page 20

Exhibit 2:

Agenda Template

Meeting Title: _____

Meeting Date: _____

Start Time: _____ End Time: _____

Location: _____

Meeting Called By: _____

Attendees: _____

Meeting Objective: _____

Agenda Topics

Topic _____ Person(s) _____ Time _____

Minutes of Previous Meeting _____

Reports _____

Unfinished Business _____

New Business _____

Adjourn _____

Notetaker: _____

Timekeeper: _____

Facilitator: _____

Please Read: _____

Please Bring: _____

Special Notes: _____

Logistics: _____



based. Although points of discussion must be summarized, the emphasis should be on decisions and future action items. Include information on the next meeting. Provide draft minutes (labeled "Draft") within 48 hours. Preparing draft minutes communicates efficiency and gets people started on subsequent tasks.

Solicit feedback about the meeting. You can use a questionnaire or call people shortly after the meeting. Asking "How do you think the meeting went?" or "How can we make our meetings better?" can yield keen insights. At the very least, soliciting feedback conveys a commitment to improving board meetings and emphasizes the value of board members' insights. ■

Resources

Harrison, Bill, "How to Present Information to Your Board," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 21, No. 1.

Hodgkin, Christopher, "If It's Not in the Minutes, Did It Happen?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 6.

McAllister, Pamela, "Should You Use Robert's Rules of Order?", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 4.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

Stan Bazan, Ph.D., is an associate professor of management, Ancell School of Business, Western Connecticut State University, Danbury, Connecticut 06810, bazans@wcsu.edu. He serves on the Advisory Council of the University's Executive Forum. The Executive Forum is a partnership between the University and the nonprofit sector. The mission of the Forum, with the University serving as a conduit, is to identify and make accessible expertise, resources, supports, and other mechanisms for capacity building in the nonprofit sector.

mustn't preclude vigorous discussion and creative problem solving. A good rule is to be more firm when agenda items involve announcements, when time is important, or if emotions begin to run high. Some board members may be uncomfortable with a firm facilitator at first, but this concern will fade as board meetings end on time and yield tangible results.

Close the meeting in a way that conveys organization, emphasizes accomplishments, and sets the stage for future activity. Summarize key points of discussion, decisions, and subsequent actions, noting who will do what and by when. Schedule the next meeting before you adjourn, and be certain to end on time.

Step 3: Follow Up.

Provide minutes as promptly as possible. Minutes should be agenda