

Twelve Ways to Liven Up Your Board Meetings – And Your Board

Share these ideas with your board members, and watch meetings rocket from boring to fired up.

By Gail Perry

If your board meetings are regarded as an unpleasant obligation, it's time to bring a fresh perspective: Board meetings are an opportunity to exchange ideas, resolve issues, and deepen commitment. Here are 12 great ways to rethink your approach and create meetings that bring out your board's best.

1. Focus the agenda on results.

Look for ways to structure real discussions that will elicit commitment and leadership. Decide what's most needed from the meeting, and set your agenda accordingly. Tell your board members at the beginning of the session why they're present and what you need from them: "By the end of this meeting, we need to accomplish x, y, and z." That will get their attention.

2. Be creative with the agenda.

Look for ways to tweak the meeting plan to evoke your board members' passion for your cause. Avoid a dry recital of figures. Instead, humanize your discussions by giving the board insight into what your organization is accomplishing out in the world.

For a more radical approach, occasionally throw out the agenda altogether. Let the board create its own order of business by consensus at the beginning of the meeting. That way everyone is immediately paying attention to the work that needs to be accomplished. They're not meeting just for routine reporting and discussing: Action needs to be taken on real issues now.

3. Focus on problems, challenges, or broad issues.

Discussions of this nature will activate your board members' backgrounds and skills sets, not to mention their interest. Such discussions will allow you to draw upon a deeper

reservoir of their talent and energy, and will give them more interesting work.

4. Look at trends within routine reports.

Identify larger, big-picture issues that are reflected within routine reports. For example, along with the financial report, consider a discussion of long-run implications of certain revenue or cost trends.

What are three important questions anyone might want to ask about this month's financial report? Identify these questions yourself and introduce them to the board as discussion topics.

Also, along with the regular fundraising report, you could schedule a big-picture discussion of the pros and cons of a subject (such as fundraising events, which we know to be high cost and effort while providing a lower financial return than cultivating major donors). Or you might have the board brainstorm ways to double the funds raised from the annual event. (Wouldn't you love to hear your board grapple with that one?)

5. Plan big.

Bring strategic ideas into regular board meetings. For example, you could take the standard strategic planning focus on organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis). Divide the four subjects over four board meetings, and at each meeting, take your board through a discussion or update of one of these issues.

6. Look at your board meetings as cheerleading sessions.

Get ready to fire up your board members and put them into action. For these meetings, consider the board as the team that's out on the field, with the role of the staff being to encourage and congratulate them: How would you stage such a session? Identify who would need to speak in order to rev up the board's energy.

7. Use consent agendas.

Why devote valuable meeting time to routine business items that don't require much board discussion? Instead, use a consent agenda – a list of items mailed out in advance and

“Occasionally throw out the agenda altogether.”



approved in one vote. Any member can ask that a consent agenda item be moved back into the regular agenda for discussion.

You can also handle committee reports in this manner. Simply provide board members with written reports in place of lengthy oral reports.

8. Interview the executive director.

How about having a relaxed “fireside chat” with your executive director for about 10 minutes at each meeting? Ask the executive: What’s on your mind? What keeps you up at night? What an interesting discussion this could be and how engaging for board members.

9. Always choose one interesting item and set it up for a discussion.

If you’re nervous about turning your board loose and aren’t sure where the discussion might go, let a few trusted board members know in advance about the planned discussion. Tell them your perspective and what you need from the board’s conversation on this issue.

10. Select a theme for each meeting.


Structure the meeting around a theme, based on a need or issue facing the organization. For particularly important issues, the theme can be repeated over the course of several meetings until you’ve completed an in-depth analysis of the topic.

11. Create “mission moments” in every board meeting.

Give your trustees a personal experience of your mission in action. Use a testimonial or story about someone touched by your organization. This could be the most powerful subject of the entire meeting.

12. Break into groups.

Instead of reporting to board members about an upcoming challenge, present the issue as a question and ask them to discuss it in small groups. Afterwards, the board chair can facilitate a full group discussion.

Having small groups enables everyone to speak. It encourages shy people, who typically avoid speaking to the full board, to participate. And asking questions is the best way to understand a problem and come up with a solution. 



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Try These Ideas

What are you doing to fire up your own board? For more inspiration, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Three Vital Questions for Your Board (Vol. 36, No. 1)

Using Board Portals to Keep Directors Connected (Vol. 29, No. 3)

How to Assess and Improve Your Board’s Performance (24, No. 1)

Leading the Transformation of Boards (Vol. 22, No. 2)

Improving Boards: What Works and What Doesn’t (Vol. 15, No. 3)

How to Develop a High-Impact Board (Vol. 24, No. 4)

Seven Creative Ways to Energize Your Board (Vol. 16, No. 3)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Board Governance (snpo.org/li).