



# Make Your Meetings Productive

By Andrew Swanson

Do your board or committee meetings ever get off the track? Proper planning will keep time from being wasted.

**M**eetings are events at which minutes are kept — and hours are lost! So saith the cynic. And not without reason. But this need not be and should not be, for meetings, if properly organized, prepared for, and conducted, can accomplish a great deal, in a remarkably short period of time, and give everyone adequate opportunity to make appropriate contributions.

What makes a successful board meeting? Here's a summary of the most important factors:

## 1. Strong Committees

Board meetings can't be successful unless board committees are strong, with a history of bringing their best efforts to every assignment. Only then can board members be confident that each committee has done its job thoroughly.

## 2. Pre-Education

Board meetings will be productive only when all necessary pre-educational materials have been provided. In advance of the meeting, board members must be furnished with: minutes of all active committees, reports which will bear on decisions the board must make, minutes of the last board meeting, current financial reports, the executive director's statistical ("state of the organization") report, appropriate memoranda, and so forth. Board members should be expected to review these materials thoroughly before the meeting.

Never begin or end a meeting with a controversial issue.

## 3. Leadership from the Chair

For a board meeting to be successful there must be good leadership from the chair. This is not to recommend authoritarian heavy-handedness, but it is to remind those who chair board meetings of their obligation to keep things moving. When wheels begin to spin, it's the chair who must get the meeting back on track.

## 4. The Agenda

How an agenda is planned also plays a vital role. Typically, the board-meeting agenda should be planned jointly by the executive director and board president.

In developing the agenda, it's the president's responsibility to be in touch with each committee chair beforehand in order to know each committee's needs at the meeting. Committees having only progress to report should circulate their minutes with the call to the meeting. When a committee has a recommendation requiring board action — or a committee wishes to use the full board as a forum — then, if the committee's minutes don't adequately pre-educate the board, the committee chair should send out a memo to let board members know what they'll be dealing with at the meeting.

## 5. Group Dynamics

In organizing any agenda, pay attention to group dynamics. For

example, never begin a meeting with an issue known to be controversial. The best of boards or committees can have a heated discussion on occasion, and it's best not to begin any meeting on such a footing.

Conversely, never end a meeting with a potentially controversial issue. Whenever possible, end meetings in discussions of matters on which there's likely to be unanimity. Let participants depart feeling good about the organization.

If there are several controversial issues to be dealt with, place them in the central part of the agenda. Separate them by one or two issues of lesser import to let participants catch their breath before moving once more into deeper waters.

## Put Your Time to Good Use

Remember these principles when you plan your next board meeting. Carefully applied, they'll keep you and the rest of your board from losing hours that could be put to better use. ■

## Resources

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

Houle, Cyril, "How Effective Is Your Board? A Rating Scale," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 5.

These resources are available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members). Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Board Governance ([www.snpo.org/li](http://www.snpo.org/li)).

Andrew Swanson ([andrew@azstar.net](mailto:andrew@azstar.net)) has been a board development consultant since 1976.