

Do All Board Members Speak Up in Meetings?

Use these proven strategies to give everyone an equal voice.

By Kim Donahue

You choose your board members for their unique skills and insights. But sometimes it feels like you hear from the same four people in every board meeting. Why are the rest of the board members silent? How can you ensure that every member has a voice and feels comfortable sharing with the group? These proven tips will help.

Share Key Points & Agendas Early

Some board members are adept at thinking on their feet and answering in the moment. Your quiet members may simply be mulling over a topic or deciding what to say – and then the opportunity to chime in slips away. When you share your agenda and preparation documents with your board early, these more thoughtful, analytic members have time to formulate their responses.

Sharing key points of discussion beforehand also helps committee members make more tailored reports. And early sharing ensures you can work with complete information on everything from finances to employee issues.

Often, silence from your board members isn't an indication of disinterest. Your silent members may feel more comfortable speaking up if they have a chance to think things over or to research issues first. A simple e-mail sent a week before the meeting with the agenda, key points, and similar information can give reticent members the chance to plan ahead.

Break the Ice

Getting everyone to speak at the beginning of the meeting makes it more likely they'll speak up later. Providing that opportunity to share for new or more reserved board members at the start of the meeting takes away some of the fear of speaking up. It also establishes a board culture that respects everyone having a turn to say something.

Try going around the table and having everyone answer a question that's non-threatening and applicable to everyone, such as:

- What do you like best about this season of the year?
- What's your favorite way to get in some exercise?

“Give reticent members the chance to plan ahead.”



- What have you been watching on TV lately?
- What's your favorite Starbucks order?

Be creative and appeal to the personalities of your board members.

Take Turns Talking, & Encourage Everyone to Talk

What do you do about that one board member who, in good faith, has a stance on every issue, and always has something to say? Consider pulling this person aside before the meeting and saying something like this: “Everyone on the board respects you so much. I know a lot of members have opinions about issues but often wait to see what you'll say about it first. I wonder if you'd mind holding back for a few minutes on today's topics, and let's see if we can get the others to weigh in earlier.”

It's important for the board chair to be able to read the other board members. The trick is to know your board members well enough to tap into their personalities for a robust discussion. If someone's body language suggests that they disagree with what's being said, try to draw that person out. To keep the conversation more comfortable, you could say, for example, “Let's play devil's advocate for a minute. What do you think someone might say is the other side of this idea?”

Assign a Report

If your junior or new members don't yet feel comfortable enough to speak up and be heard in the course of a normal meeting, providing them with a report assignment before the meeting can help. Making a quick presentation about a recent fundraising or community event, covering some marketing metrics for the past quarter, or presenting an idea from a committee can make it easier for a new member to speak up.

Another useful exercise is to start each meeting with a profile of a person or organization connected with your mission. Each week, for instance, a different person might volunteer to research a nonprofit or community member that could be a resource or partner for your organization. Or someone could research and report on one of your clients or vendors. Having a specific topic like this is a great way to encourage people to speak up in a well-defined and valuable way.

Keep Everyone Engaged

Members who don't speak up are likely to be less engaged than their more outspoken counterparts. Working to improve engagement can empower silent members to add to the conversation. From giving clear ground rules to empowering members to speak up, you can help boost engagement and buy-in and make it more likely that all of your members will provide you with insight.

When you make it easy for your quieter board members to join the conversation, you'll find them talking more. From giving them a voice to actively listening, engagement is good for your entire organization.

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Keep Board Members Interested & Eager to Help

You can boost members' interest in what the board is doing and how they can play their part with articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

Turn Your Board Members into Strong Owners (Vol. 28, No. 2)

35 Questions that Will Transform Your Board Vol. 24, No. 3

Planning the Board Orientation: 12 Key Messages (Vol. 34, No. 4)

Reciprocal Board Agreements: What Do Board Members Give? What Do They Receive in Return? (Vol. 28, No. 1)

How Can You Boost Board Turnout? (Vol. 38, No. 4)

From Bored to Blazing: Fire Up Your Board (Vol. 37, No. 3)

Twelve Ways to Liven Up Your Board Meetings – And Your Board (Vol. 36, No. 3)

Increase Your Organization's Influence in Just 15 Minutes a Month (Vol. 38, No. 1)

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

Challenge Your Board to Take These Seven Quick Actions instead of Checking Messages (Vol. 38, No. 2)

How to Run the Perfect Board Meeting – While Inspiring Board Members to Raise Funds (Vol. 36, No. 4)

Sneaky and Insightful Board Room Questions (Vol. 37, No. 1)

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

Five Ways to Improve Board Engagement

1. Help new board members hit the ground running.

Provide them with materials such as a board manual and a list of contact information for people they can turn to with questions. Add the new member to your board management platform. Match each new person with a mentor from the current board. Invite new members to an organizational event.

2. Keep your organization's mission statement top of mind – always.

Make sure each board member has a solid grasp of the organization's big picture. It helps to reiterate the mission statement at the start of each meeting.

3. Establish ground rules for board meetings and events.

It seems like common sense, or common courtesy, but a refresher on the basics is never wasted time or effort. For example, one person talks at a time, and others listen fully before jumping in with their opinions.

4. Balance the amount of detail given at meetings.

The real work of planning a meeting agenda is done before the meeting even takes place. To improve board member engagement during meetings, it helps to distribute the agenda well in advance. In an open and supportive atmosphere, the amount of detail presented can be adjusted as the meeting goes along. Feedback in the way of questions, comments, and concerns about the meeting process itself is best kept for the end of the session.

5. Help board members get to know one another.

How familiar are your board members with one another? Make sure everyone knows the names and faces of other members. (To help with this, you can use the board member directory at boardable.com. Each entry includes a headshot, contact information, and links to social media profiles.) 

– from boardable blog site, boardable.com

