

# HOW TO RUN A GREAT BOARD MEETING



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## REMEMBER WHO IS IN CHARGE OF THE BOARD

The board chair is ultimately responsible for the success of a board meeting. Clearly you must work in partnership with your executive director to design the agenda but the executive director does not manage the board. Goes the other way around.

## PURPOSE OF EVERY SINGLE BOARD MEETING

- To provide each board member with the knowledge and context s/he needs to fulfill the fiduciary and strategic roles that come with board service.
- To offer an opportunity for each board member to contribute in some way that is unique to his/her skills and assets.
- To make well informed decisions about key elements of the operations of the organization (budget, strategic plans, by-laws, etc).
- To be apprised of any impending issues which may diminish the brand of the organization or its ability to fulfill its mission.
- To provide each board member with stories, facts, anecdotes and information about the power of the program work of the organization to enable her/him to serve as a first rate ambassador for the organization in daily life, cocktail parties, on the beach, at the supermarket.

## START AT THE END

Partner with your executive director and answer these questions:

- What do you want your board to feel after the meeting?
- What do you want your board members to say after the meeting?
- What do you want your board members to know after the meeting?

I've written an article entitled "A Board Meeting Should Be Like a Bowl of Wheaties" (<http://www.joangarry.com/a-board-meeting-should-be-like-a-bowl-of-wheaties/>) so my bias is clear. A board meeting should be engaging and interactive.

As a board member, I should leave feeling privileged to serve. I should leave with a story or two that I can tell to my family, friends and prospects about why the work is so important and why I serve on the board. I should feel that my participation mattered.

I should be fired up and ready to go.

## BEFORE THE BOARD MEETING

As a board chair, you owe this to the volunteers who offered to serve. You have an obligation to be prepared and to use their time wisely. Plans look different depending on how frequently you meet. That said there are a few constants:

- The prior board meeting should end with a group discussion – brainstorming possible agenda items for the next meeting.
- Chair and ED should meet a month in front of each meeting (here I am assuming you meet bimonthly) to talk about the agenda. The outcome should be a rough draft.
- In an ideal situation, that draft should be on the agenda for an Executive Committee meeting for the buy in of that group as well (more people bought in, the better the agenda and the fewer surprises).
- Before every board meeting, the chair should be in touch one-on-one with the following board members:
  - o The treasurer. Does she have what she needs from the person in charge of finances? Are there decisions that need to be made? Are there going to be any red flags. Then a discussion on how to manage those and what you and the treasurer hope the outcome will look like.
  - o Development Chair. What will that update look like? Are the chair and the Development Director on the same page? What is the intended outcome of this portion of the agenda? Most importantly, how might this portion of the agenda ignite more engagement from the board around fundraising.
  - o Your Devil's advocate board member. Before finalizing the agenda, use your devil's advocate to understand what might be bubbling up. Maybe there is a way to preempt that with a smart tweak to the agenda.

## THE AGENDA

Each will be different but there are, in my mind, a few non-negotiables beyond simply approving the minutes from the prior meeting:

- Financials - But please oh please find some way to present them so that there is no eye glazing. For several years I was lucky to have a funny, sardonic and brilliant treasurer. During those years, the numbers were always clear to everyone.
- A Goosebump Moment - At every meeting there needs to be an opportunity for each board member to have an authentic *emotional* connection to the work.
- Fundraising - If this is one of the top three roles of a board member, it must be on every agenda. But make sure you are creative about this. Development Chair and Development director need to work together, to present a united front. Tell success stories. Tell a lot of stories AND show the numbers. Make their targets clear and pray that your Development Chair sees herself as a peer champion for board fundraising.
- An Opportunity for the Board to Weigh in on something. If the whole meeting feels canned and if you feel like all you really needed to bring to the board meeting was a rubber stamp, push back on the ED. What is the knot you are untangling (not to unearth your inadequacy but to take advantage of the talent in the room)? Far too often, board members feel like human ATMs. You won't get high performing board members if that is how you treat them.

- A Peak Inside the Movement. Board members join to be part of an elite club. To be part of the movement. They want to know about the global issues, the trends. They will be better board members if their focus is broader than just your organization.
- Ten Minutes at the End for an Evaluation Form. Don't save this technique for retreats. Impress on board members that these meetings belong to them and that their feedback (written comments, not just numbers) helps to ensure that future meetings meet their needs as well as those of the organization.

## AFTER THE MEETING

- Thank You Notes. The E.D. and the Board Chair *separately* should send a thank you note to the board. It would be a total homerun if the message amplified the message you want them to communicate to friends and family about the meeting and the organization by extension. It should also of course include any action items or commitments made by individuals or committees.
- A Debrief. It should be on the weekly Chair/ ED call agenda for the following week while the meeting is still fresh. The two should review the assessments (if you have a board liaison or assistant, a summary of the evaluations should be prepared), take note of possible future agenda items and work through the action items and assign them.

