

Consent Agenda

Creating an efficient meeting agenda is an issue with which many chairs struggle. Standard, repetitive items often eat up the agenda, and not enough time is left to focus on serious deliberation. Consent agendas are one way of liberating the allotted meeting time in order to concentrate on important issues requiring careful discussion.

What is a consent agenda?

A consent agenda is a component of a meeting agenda that enables the board to group routine items and resolutions under one umbrella. As the name implies, there is a general agreement on the procedure. Issues in this consent package do not need any discussion before a vote. Unless a board member requests a removal of an item ahead of time, the entire package is voted on at once without any additional explanations or comments. Because no questions or comments are allowed on the content, this procedure saves time.

What items should be included in a consent agenda?

Routine, standard, non-controversial, and self-explanatory are adjectives that well describe consent agenda items. Here are some examples:

- Minor changes in a procedure (e-mail is added as an acceptable method of communication to announce a change in a meeting schedule)
- Routine revisions of a policy (essential change of dates)
- Updating documents (address change for the main office)
- Standard contracts that are used regularly (confirmation of using the traditional in-house contract with a new vendor)
- Confirmation of conventional actions that are required in the bylaws (signatory authority for a bank account or acceptance of gifts)
- Committee and previous board meeting minutes

How to make a consent agenda function efficiently

Information on the items to be included in a consent agenda is distributed to board members well ahead of the meeting. This allows thorough examination of the routine items without using up valuable meeting minutes. If a board member has a question, he or she can contact a referenced colleague to clarify a concern. If this is not helpful enough, during the meeting before a vote, any board member may request that an item from the consent agenda be removed and discussed separately. To keep the process intact and efficient, this is the only comment allowed concerning the contents of a consent agenda. To streamline the process even more, board members could be invited to contact the chair prior to the meeting to request that an item be removed.

What precautions need attention?

As consent agendas are not yet automatically included in meeting procedures, their use needs to be well explained to all board members to ensure that everyone understands both the rationale and the steps involved. To achieve the objective of a consent agenda — to save valuable discussion time for meaningful issues — it is important to make sure that board members receive support materials well before voting, and that they familiarize themselves with the details. When putting the agenda together, the chair and the chief executive need to pay special attention to include only items that are suitable for mechanical processing. Board members need to be vigilant so that debatable issues do not accidentally pass through without appropriate deliberation.

References

Chait, Richard, Thomas Holland and Barbara Taylor. *Improving the Performance of Governing Boards*.

Holmgren, Norah. *10 Minutes to Better Board Meetings*.