

BOARD CULTURE & MEETINGS

Whether you know it or not, your board has an internal culture, and how your board runs its meetings is a reflection of it. Whether you carry on a structured business meeting, diligently following strict rules, or do business in a relaxed manner and atmosphere may be creating either an incentive or a hindrance to fully engaging your present and future board members.

SEEKING A BALANCE

How your board members communicate with each other, work as a team, and solve problems all define the culture of your board and can result in an efficient and productive working group. That productivity will not result, however, if your board focuses on irrelevancies rather than the core purpose of the meetings. Only by looking at your board culture in more detail can you determine whether you have a group hung up on process that functions like a private social club, or one that continually accomplishes important things.

It helps to find the sweet spot between structured and open communication.

SOME STRUCTURE NEEDED

Every board needs some structure for its internal operations. Without it your board will not have a common reference point to rely on if and when the unexpected happens. Specific standards serve as a guide to help your board do the right thing and help solve dilemmas that arise from individual board member behavior. At the other end of the spectrum, too much structure and too many rules can stifle creativity and result in focusing more on rules than results.

How do you run your board meetings? Do you follow any written rules or guidelines or do you reach decisions without any pre-determined process? There is no need to rely on Robert's Rules of Order or any other parliamentary authority to control every minute of your board meeting. Some structure, however, is necessary or you risk encouraging unruly exchange of ideas and missing the contributions of quieter board members. Structure allows you to keep better records of the meeting proceedings. Well-facilitated deliberation supports a free exchange of ideas without forcing members to feel constrained and overly controlled.

As you're looking at your structure, keep in mind one essential element: quorum. Do all your board members come to meetings regularly? Or, do people drop in and out as they please? You must establish a quorum at the beginning of the meeting and ensure that it is recorded in the minutes. No matter how informal your meeting process is, without a quorum you won't have a meeting.

COMMUNICATING OPENLY

How do your board members communicate with each other? Do they show respect of differing opinions? Can you all disagree courteously? In fact, do you encourage differing opinions and challenging points of view? If yes, you probably have a board that is open to new ways of doing things and that does not form cliques fighting with each other. A difference of opinion does not equal dysfunction; an inability to communicate respectfully does.

PROFESSIONALISM NECESSARY

If your board tends to have a "lenient" atmosphere, would you characterize your meetings as relaxed professional, or relaxed social gatherings? Is it clear you are attending a business meeting or are you there to exchange the latest

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news with your fellow members? Never forget that your meetings are the moments when you plan the future of your organization; your position as board members means you have pledged to fulfill certain fiduciary duties. You are leading a nonprofit business. While professionalism does not mean pin-striped suits and long mahogany tables, it does mean that you have a serious agenda and make serious decisions. That can — and hopefully does — happen in a pleasant and friendly atmosphere where humor and fun are also present.

RECORDS MATTER

How do you keep minutes of your meetings? Do you record the essential actions and decisions that take place or are your minutes long, verbatim stories of who said what? If it is easy to go back to your minutes book after a couple of years and get a sense of what happened, you probably have a good system in place — no matter what the actual format is. (Finding your records easily is an excellent sign you're on the right track!)

SUCCESS STORY

A positive boardroom culture might look like this: Your board members find it enjoyable and exciting to come to the meetings. Members like working with each other because mutual respect is present and they feel that they learn something from their interactions.

Board meetings are business meetings, but that does not mean that enjoyment and good spirits must be checked at the door. If you are committed to your cause, engage each member in discussion, and encourage a respectful expression of a diversity of opinions, your board can tell its own success story.

Resource: [Meeting, and Exceeding Expectations](#)