

Board Members Zoning Out? Stop Reading the CEO Report

Posted by **Robert B. Acton** on Oct 9, 2017 10:14:00 AM

FADE IN:

INT. THE BOARDROOM – NIGHT



PETER, the board chair, invites Susan, the organization’s passionate chief executive, to begin her Executive Director Report as the next item on the board meeting agenda. Susan turns to page 12 of the 60-page board packet that she and her team have diligently spent hours preparing. The somewhat glazed-over eyes of 14 board members — struggling to stay fully-engaged after long days at the office in their day job — slowly shift in Susan’s direction. The pages of their board packets remain untouched.

What happens next?

Susan reads the report.

As a chief executive, a board member, and a governance consultant, few things have irked me more over two decades in nonprofit leadership than seeing a room full of wise, experienced community and business leaders passively listen as the chief executive reviews in detail the updates, data, insights, and concerns he or she has

carefully written and included in the pre-read packet sent to board members in advance of the board meeting. What a waste of time. What a missed opportunity to leverage the board's collective wisdom and experience. What a non-strategic approach to leadership.

In my first two years leading Cabrini Green Legal Aid in Chicago, I would block hours of time on my calendar in advance of board meetings to craft (in my humble opinion) written masterpieces, entitled "The Executive Director's Report." I would communicate comprehensive updates on the matters that I thought the board should pay attention to. In that moment when the board chair would turn to me and say, "Rob, time for your report," I would feel my pulse race. My adrenaline suddenly kicked-in. Here it was: my time to shine. For the next 20 to 30 minutes, I would verbally walk them through my written report. All eyes on me, I was certain that board members were learning exactly what they needed to know to serve as effective governors of the organization.

I had it completely wrong.

What I discovered in my third year of nonprofit leadership was a much more effective way to bring board members up-to-speed on the range of topics that they should be keeping their eyes on in their fiduciary role.

My advice to chief executives who report to their boards:

First, continue to write a comprehensive report that scans the various categories of responsibility under your purview as chief executive. I think of nonprofit leadership as a pond with numerous lily pads that the leader should touch each week (if not each day). An effective leader of a complex organization hops from lily pad to lily pad, checking in on each area of oversight in meaningful ways while also not staying too long, getting sucked into the details and becoming unavailable for the leadership required across all areas of responsibility. These "lily pads" include areas such as program effectiveness, progress on the strategic plan, financial management, fundraising, staff and staff morale, board development, general administration, risk

management, and the like. Take the time to bring the board up to speed on each category in a well-written, thoughtful report to the board.

Second, at the board meeting, when the board chair turns to you and invites the report, say something like this:

As you know, I've included my written report in the board packet. I trust everyone had a chance to read it. Rather than simply repeat highlights from what you've already read, I'd like to invite you to respond to one of three questions:

- *What did you read in my report that excited you about where we are as an organization? I'd like to hear what's important to you.*
- *What did you read that caused anxiety or concern? We as a board should explore any concerns in detail.*
- *What did you read that left you with further questions? I'd like the opportunity to elaborate to ensure clarity.*

For shorthand, I think of this as the **Plus-Delta-Question Exercise**.

- **Plus:** What are you enthusiastic about?
- **Delta:** What concerned you?
- **Question:** What open questions do you have?

Fair warning: The first time you try this, there may be an awkward silence. As you know, too often board members don't prepare for board meetings by reading the board packet as thoroughly as they should. This approach to your Executive Director's Report will help change that. As this becomes the chief executive's standard approach in board meetings, board members will recognize their important preparation role in the process. In fact, you may want to reach out to individual board members in advance to help avoid the embarrassment of a clearly unprepared board. Ask one board member to prepare a question on topic X, another board member to prepare a question on topic Y, and so on. As a former college radio DJ, I'm generally afraid of "dead air" at meetings. You may be too. This strategy will help.

By putting this approach into practice, you will find that the Executive Director's Report will become a valued agenda item in each meeting whereby the chief executive converses *with* the board instead of talks *at* the board. Board members will focus the discussion on the organizational matters most important to them. The chief executive will no longer be the "know it all" with a monopoly on all of the best information, but will glean from the collective wisdom and insights of the organization's governing body. The overall level of board engagement will grow as the Executive Director's Report becomes a thoughtful, wide-ranging, probing conversation rather than a well-rehearsed monologue.

Give it a try!