

Preparing for More Effective, Focused, and STRATEGIC BOARD MEETINGS

Board meetings should be a place for the discussion, debate, and consideration that can't take place in a written report or presentations from the chief executive and committee chairs. A commitment to having strategic meetings means focusing on providing your board members with opportunities to connect to the work of the organization and engage in action-oriented, results-driven work. And it takes intentionally structured meetings to make this happen.

Unfortunately, only two-thirds of boards use effective meeting practices according to benchmark data gathered from the BoardSource board self-assessment tool. Effective meeting practices include comprehensive preparation, a clear agenda, strong facilitation skills, and, most importantly, wise time management. Why is all of this so important? Because board meetings are your opportunity to benefit from the expertise and insights of leaders who support your mission, have a shared purpose, and have the influence to impact your mission. They're right there — in person and in front of you — and typically only a few times a year. Make the time count.

PREPARATION: ROLES OF THE CHAIR, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, BOARD MEMBERS, AND SENIOR LEADERSHIP

While meeting preparation can be time consuming, it is crucial to a successful board meeting. BoardSource recommends moving routine reporting and updates to a consent agenda and reserving meeting time for discussion of critical issues and concerns and decision making. If the board spends its time on passively listening to reports rather than engaging in active discussion and debate about critical issues the organization is navigating, the result is inadequate governance and leadership. Fortunately, smart boards realize that time truly is a scarce commodity, and they make an effort to spend every minute of their meeting strategically and purposefully.

Board Chair and Chief Executive

Every chief executive knows that it takes more than two hours two weeks out to prepare for a board meeting. In many organizations, the weeks prior to board meetings contain the most hectic hours for the chief executive. And every chair knows that getting ready for a board meeting means intensive communication with the chief executive to ensure all members come to the meeting prepared to focus on the right issues.

In a discussion between the chief executive and chair, the chair ensures that the meeting agenda includes topics for discussion that are appropriate and relevant to the board. The chief executive adds topics that the board would not otherwise know, such as the organization's operational challenges and successes since the last meeting, and possible future issues the board should be prepared to tackle. Together the two leaders can prioritize the issues while ensuring that the agenda is not too staff-driven or operational but still includes the chief executive's internal perspective. It also is helpful to highlight the items in the agenda requiring board voting, perhaps providing a list of main discussion points.

Board Members

The board should know well in advance that the meeting is taking place and be given adequate time to prepare for it. The organization should send all board members a packet of information containing the board meeting agenda, background materials for discussion items, and other pertinent information. All board members should read their packets in detail before the meeting.

Senior Leadership

During the weeks (or months) leading up to the board meeting, senior staff typically supports the CEO with the information he or she needs to create an integrated and comprehensive report, such as detailed information about their areas of responsibility and department budgets. A crucial function of a board is to monitor and evaluate its

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organization's advancement in fulfilling its mission and, more specifically, in meeting previously set goals. One of the most helpful tools to that effect is a dashboard report that senior leadership supports the chief executive in preparing. A dashboard typically utilizes graphs, charts, tables, and/or columns — and limited text — to show how the organization is functioning. The document presents visual information consistent with, and compared to, previous data, that enables the board to effortlessly spot changes or trends in performance.

Board meetings require advance preparation to ensure that they are productive, stay on course, and receive full participation from all attendees. All meeting participants must do their share of preparation and homework. Preparing for a board meeting requires time, resources, and selfless effort to ensure a successful outcome when board members convene.

THE BOARD MEETING: ROLES OF THE CHAIR, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, BOARD MEMBERS, AND SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Thoughtful discussion and consideration drives good decisions; it is the foundation of a meeting. During boardroom dialogue, members of the board discuss all sides of an issue. Without a thorough conversation of all aspects relating to the issues that are most important to your purpose and mission, it is difficult to come to a sound, founded, and fair conclusion or decision.

Board Chair

Chairs may find that they need to prepare more vigorously for discussion-based board meetings. By honing their facilitation techniques, they can work to ensure that all active issues get proper attention and every board member has an opportunity to participate. A committed chair wants an orderly meeting with active participants. He or she welcomes unconventional comments that stimulate discussion, encourages quiet board members to express their opinions, and leads the board to making clear and committed decisions.

Chief Executive

A board meeting is the chief executives chance to benefit from the collective wisdom of board members. With ample time for discussion, executives have a chance to introduce important and new issues the organization is navigating, and profit from immediate feedback. A committed chief executive looks forward to interacting with the full board as a team as they prioritize the important matters at hand. He or she wants a board that understands the challenges he or she struggles with every day in terms of the complex questions and meaningful issues the organization is tackling. And the chief executive wants to feel that the board is behind him or her, supporting efforts and providing clear and unambiguous guidance for future actions and priorities.

Board Members

Committed board members want to feel that their time is well spent and their meaningful input and work are appreciated. They look to the chair to conduct the meeting by framing discussion items, but to also join other members in expressing their opinions about the important topics being debated. The meeting should get board members excited about the work they do – work that truly matters – and also the accomplishments of the organization. Board member should leave invigorated and anticipating the next meeting.

Senior Leadership

The staff's main role during a board meeting is to be available for consultation and to support the chief executive. A staff person may be asked to present information pertaining to a program or service that may be useful in board discussion or as part of board member education. His or her role is not typically to engage in discussion or debate related to the work of the board unless they are pertinent to the conversation and the chief executive has asked them to participate (in a likely limited capacity).

It takes time to ensure that you are using effective meeting practices, but when all the pieces fall in place and all of your board members are energetically focused on helping you advance your mission, everyone you serve benefits.

CONVERSATIONS WORTH HAVING

Are we paying attention to what's changing?

As nonprofits across the country make sense of their new post-election realities and the impact of new leadership at the local, state, and federal level, the need for board engagement in advocacy has never been greater. Whenever there are changes in public leadership, it's crucial for nonprofit leaders to educate new policymakers about their missions and work. With new lawmakers come new power dynamics, and nonprofits cannot take anything for granted in terms of public support — whether that support is financial or policy-related.

With nonprofit leaders needing to do even more to prepare for potentially rapid and dramatic policy and funding changes, here are a few questions that are appropriate for board-level discussion:

- Do we understand the impact new leadership may have on our purpose and mission, and the associated opportunities and threats?
- How are we going to educate new leaders about our organization, our work, and why it should matter to them?
- Are we well positioned to leverage our board's influence when the stakes are high and it matters most?

Your board's answers to these questions will help provide clarity and direction about your organization's fundamental purpose as well as the larger ecosystem in which you operate. Both will be helpful as you think about what's most important for your future, and the opportunities that may exist to strategically align with another organization.

Sources: [*The Board Chair Handbook, Meeting, and Exceeding Expectations: A Guide to Successful Nonprofit Board Meetings*](#), [*The Source, Culture of Inquiry*](#), [*Stand for Your Mission*](#) campaign.

Have we considered what a strategic partnership could do for our mission?

Strategic partnerships can open new opportunities for serving missions. They can broaden nonprofits' reach, expand the range of programs or services, and identify more efficient ways to support organizations' important work. BoardSource believes there's a powerful opportunity for boards and organizations to think big about strategic partnerships, and that an organization's core purpose can be served well when organizations find creative ways to collaborate and partner.

Any conversation about strategic partnerships should begin with straightforward questions about an organization's current operating reality:

- What is our core purpose? What problem are we trying to solve or what new reality are we trying to create?
- If we were to be founded today, would it be to fill an unmet need within our community and world?
- If we were to close our doors today, from whom would we hear and what would they say?
- Do we have the resources and capacities we need to grow — or even continue — the impact that we seek to have in the world?