

Don't Waste My Time: Simple Steps to Making Board Meetings Work

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So it's Monday night and you've got another board meeting to attend. Do you dread it? Or do you anticipate an enjoyable and productive evening? When co-op staff and directors pay attention to a few fundamental guidelines for creating good meetings, co-ops can eliminate meetings that leave talented directors wondering why they aren't accomplishing something of value with their time. Replace them with meetings that leave everyone feeling that they are providing important leadership that furthers the mission of their cooperative.

Put It Into Context

That starts with the meeting agenda. It should always be seen as a piece of a larger context, such as the board's annual calendar. While a board occasionally needs to deal with crises, most of its work should be predictable and proactive. If board members frequently wonder why an issue is on the agenda, or why one isn't, the board chair and staff need to step back and take a look at the annual calendar. If you take the time to ensure that everyone on your board understands the larger context, then you've gone a long way to smoothing out twelve months worth of meetings.

Beyond Board Business: Connect Your Members

Most agendas follow a familiar format: starting with agenda and minutes approval and concluding with an overall meeting evaluation. In addition, skillful meeting planners will include regular opportunities to help directors enhance the personal connection they feel with the other people in the room. Make time for a "check-in" and for announcements, personal or professional, unrelated to the board's work. This simple step can help your board to function well as a team.

Explain and Set Expectations

Don't just put items on the agenda without a clear explanation of their content and purpose. For each agenda item, provide a clear summary that includes how much time will be spent on it; who will present the issue; and what outcomes are expected. Is the board merely hearing a report? Or is discussion or decision making required? This helps your board members know how much to prepare for each item and tells them what to expect.

Be Prepared

There's more to being a director than just showing up. Effective board members show respect for each other's limited time by coming to meetings having read the background materials, reports, and previous minutes. You show your respect for each other by arriving ready to participate productively in the discussion because you have thought about and studied the topic before you arrive at the meeting. Doing your homework in advance also helps meetings become exponentially more productive and worthwhile for everyone, and the board can accomplish that much more for the cooperative's members.

Establish a Facilitator

Even with a clear agenda and a room full of prepared board members, you still need effective facilitation for a good meeting. Facilitators must serve, as well as lead, the board. Whether the chair acts as facilitator or whether this role rotates among members or is provided by an outside professional, having someone charged with moving meetings forward is critical. The facilitator must also prepare ahead of time, and should come to the meeting early and with a clear, calm and open state of mind. Without being heavy-handed, facilitators work to open and close the meeting on time, and to stick to the agenda's stated time limits

Get to the Outcome

As you work through each item, make sure you get to the desired outcome. If the item is a report, remind people that they should only ask clarifying questions; they don't need to advocate for their position. A brainstorming session does not ask for any evaluation of the ideas, just free speaking and receptive listening. During discussions, encourage speakers to be concise and discourage interruption and repetition. If the desired outcome is a board decision, facilitators have a more essential role. Help the board move toward its final agreement by ensuring that a viewpoint is understood before moving on and by frequently summarizing points of agreement.

Actively Foster Participation

Facilitators need to introduce an array of tools and tactics to ensure that the board hears the full range of viewpoints. Good debaters need encouragement to make room for more reserved or less articulate directors. A simple "go-round" the room for opinions can slow down the conversation and give everyone a chance to express views without interruption. A brainstorming session, in which everyone is encouraged to share as many ideas as possible, whether realistic or outlandish, and to withhold evaluation until later, can generate excitement for new ideas or allow group members to see connections that were not previously apparent Use the "fishbowl" technique to change the tenor of a meeting. In the fishbowl, half of your directors carry on the discussion while the others silently observe. After a set time, the observers can explain what they noticed.

For complex subjects try a different tactic to make sure directors are not just heard, but also understood. Have each person respond in writing to the question at hand. Then ask everyone to work in pairs. Each person should read their response while their partner works to understand, not evaluate, that response. Then, ask everyone to explain to the board their partner's response as if it were their own.

Park It, Then Go Out for Coffee

If board members raise issues that are not on the agenda, the facilitator can acknowledge those ideas by putting them in a "parking lot," an area for storing ideas that the board will address in future meetings. When the conversation is going nowhere, emotions are getting in the way of respectful interaction, or one person's agenda has steered the board away from its primary duty to serve the whole membership, take a five-minute break. During the break, the facilitator should discuss the item with the wayward director so he or she can add it to the parking lot or reframe it for continued productive discussion.

Look Back

After the meeting, evaluate it. Were members respectful of each other? Were they prepared? Were expectations and outcomes clearly established and met? Was everyone heard? If you can honestly answer yes to these questions, chances are that your meeting worked and that you made a valuable contribution to your cooperative by attending that Monday night meeting. Making your meetings productive and worthwhile helps ensure that your co-op continues to attract qualified, committed and active directors.

Tip box: Steps to Effective Board Meetings

- Set a clear agenda
- Foster a connection
- Set expectations
- Be prepared
- Establish a facilitator
- Encourage participation
- Achieve expected outcomes
- Set off-topic issues in the parking lot
- Evaluate the meeting

Resources:

If you would like more ideas for how to facilitate your board's decision-making process, check out *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, by Sam Kaner, et al. (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1996)