

Better Board Meetings Start to Finish

Introduction

Foundation board meetings both reveal and determine the strength of your foundation. Done well, they equip volunteer leaders with the understanding and enthusiasm needed to effectively represent your organization. Too often, though, board meetings are sources of frustration. Presentations met with near silence. The same few board members speaking, agendas that feel stale, and meetings ending with everyone unclear of their value. Below are a few proven tactics for meetings that inspire the most meaningful work.

Plan the Meeting. Not Just the Agenda.

About three months before each meeting, sit with your board chair to build the meeting plan. Don't jump right into choosing topics, speakers, and times. Start by answering questions like: "When board members are driving home, what do we want them to be thinking and feeling?" "What issues and opportunities facing the organization do we need to address?" "What recent pride points should board members share with their networks?" "Which board members seem a little disconnected?" These are just a few examples of questions that when thoughtfully answered, lay a great foundation for a strong meeting.

“My board chair complains that we don't have enough discussion. Other board members say they don't know enough about what's happening in the organization. How can I please both and accomplish what's important to our fundraising team?”

Build the Agenda and Be Realistic

Once you know the balance needed between information sharing, generative discussion, board collaboration activities, and board business, you're ready to build the agenda. The biggest barrier to a great board meeting is trying to do too much. Maybe your meetings aren't long enough, but whatever the length has been set at, resist the temptation to overpack the agenda.

For example, if you have a physician or faculty speaker sharing their work, plan for at least 40-45 minutes. You need time for their presentation, for Q&A that doesn't feel rushed, and for the development officer who works with that speaker to present gift opportunities and speaking points board members can use as ambassadors in the community.

Speaker Prep

This is the part of board meetings that's almost always underdone or not done at all. Yes, it may seem impossible to have strong preparation when speakers finish their presentations right before your board meeting. Ways to combat last-minute delivery include a) making the invitation to speak prestigious; "the board chair, dean/CEO, and I chose you...", b) sending a briefing covering what is asked of every speaker, including prep and slide formatting, c) thanking them in ways that matter to them and that will set the tone with peers about participating in foundation meetings.

Track Engagement

Make sure to note who speaks and who stays silent. Within a few days of the meeting, follow up with those who didn't speak. You'll often learn the most about what's unsaid but important to improving your board meetings.

Control the Controllables

Board meetings are events and should receive as much logistics focus as an in-home salon or reception. Assigned seats, two-sided table tents, thoughtful table placements, screens large enough to see the presentation, microphones (you do need them), printed materials that are organized so it's easy to track with the agenda... experience details send a signal to board members that this meeting is important and that they're important. No matter what your budget is, you can improve the board meeting experience.

Let's bring out the best in your board. Whether it's a full board engagement reset or a few adjustments, together, we can build a board experience that inspires new levels of excellence.



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