

Innovative Agenda Practices

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Most board agendas look similar. They begin with a call to order, approval of the minutes, review of finances and transition to reports. On average the officers, committees and staff offer 15 reports and updates.

Listening to and reading reports is not governance. A board's purpose is to advance a mission, serve members and oversee assets.

The passion and expertise of directors should be leveraged. A traditional agenda format may be wasting board time.

If not all, the younger, newer leaders expect better engagement and meaningful dialog. SuccessfulMeetings.com stated, "...younger people in meetings are more likely to be on their laptops than listening to your PowerPoint. Don't blame them---blame the meeting." If the meeting agenda and discussion are boring, minds will wander.

Agenda Innovation

Agendas can be made more interesting through some innovative practices.

Discuss with officers, "How can we improve our meetings and outcomes?" Brainstorm ways to craft a more effective agenda for an improved meeting experience.

Room Set-Up – Not all board work has to be at a conference table. Make available space for break-outs with meeting nooks and round tables. Use a set-up that inspires small groups to tackle problems and develop solutions. The general room set-up is an open-U. The open-U allows the board chair to see and call on directors as they raise their hands.

Enhancements – Make meeting attendance more interesting by selecting a unique venue, inviting a highly regarded speaker or providing directors with a new book related to the issues at hand. Plan something fun after the meeting.

Consent Agenda – Move non-controversial reports to a consent agenda. Distribute reports with the meeting agenda or make them available on-line for directors to read in advance. By a single motion of the board, the reports can be accepted and board work can move to the substantive issues. Use of a consent agenda requires reports be submitted in advance and directors read them before arriving.

Board Packets – Redesign the board packet to be interesting and engaging. Keep reports to one page, rely on bullets to convey information, and use links to supporting information. Use technology and graphics to enhance the image of reports. A page full of sentences and paragraphs can be replaced with an info-graphic to increase understanding. Many boards forgo the board packet in favor of projecting reports on a central screen or directors' tablets.

Environmental Scan – Set aside time consider outside influences on the organization. Directors are closer to day to day activities and are likely more aware of developing trends and challenges. The purpose is to raise the board's thinking so they stay at an elevated level throughout the meeting (staying out of the weeds.)

Mission Moment – Take a moment to discuss how the association has made an impact. These might include helping an individual, awarding scholarships, reaching milestones or public recognition for association work. Discuss if there has been a return on mission (ROI) for the organization.

Orientation Moment – Plan a few minutes at each meeting to improve leadership. For example, enhanced insights into understanding financials or IRS Form 990, or how to handle board confidentiality and leaks. “Bursts of knowledge during the year supplement the annual orientation to keep directors fresh in learning about governance,” said Jarron Springer, CAE and CEO at the Greater Nashville Realtors.

Guest Management – There are pros and cons to including guests. They should respect the same protocols as board members, i.e. confidentiality, being recognized before speaking. If guests and ex-officio members are invited to give reports, allocate time for reports and then invite them to be excused --- they probably don't want to sit through the entire meeting.

Blue Sky – Allow for “blue sky” thinking on the agenda by asking a question that go to the core of the organization. For example, “how do changing demographics impact membership and conference attendance?” Allocate time just to brainstorm on a problem. The solutions may become a new program or newsletter article.

Strategic Plan – The strategic plan is the board's GPS. The goals should be right on the agenda, making them the basis of every meeting. Discussion is then laser-focused on the goals and advancing the strategic plan. Keep a copy of the strategic plan on the board table for quick reference. As proposals are made ask, “What part of the strategic plan does this impact?”

Dashboards – If reports are needed, use dashboards to compare the same data from meeting to meeting. Dashboards are charts and graphs to depict performance in key areas such as membership, finances and influence.

Segment – Divide the agenda into segments. For example after the perfunctory welcome, reminders and introductions, segment the meeting into thirds: 1/3 - Business of the Association, 1/3 - Strategic Direction, 1/3 – Problem Solving and Visioning.

Footnotes – Incorporate information at the bottom of the agenda as footnotes or a footer --- the mission statement is key. And use reminders about avoiding antitrust, maintaining confidentiality, and disclosing conflicts of interest.

Timestamps – Indicate the allotted time for items. Directors need to know if an item is scheduled for ten minutes or an hour for example. This will help them know the depth of discussion and work towards a timely adjournment.

Virtual Participation – For directors who absolutely cannot attend due to distance or time, offer quality options to participate virtually. It is as easy as someone using FaceTime, Skype, WhatsApp or other tools to log into the meeting. Not only should they log in, someone present in the room might serve as their avatar listening to their questions and making sure they are able to participate fully. Be careful about losing the value of face-to-face meetings by going overboard on directors wanting to call in.

New Business - Consider removing the call for “new business.” As a meeting is close to adjourning bringing up new ideas is futile. Set a process for adding new business that involves a review by the officers and the executive director days or weeks before the agenda is set.

Back of the Agenda – Use the back of the agenda. Some organizations include a board report card to review director attendance and contributions. Others print a meeting evaluation form or an abbreviated strategic plan on the reverse.

What's Next? – End meetings with this question: “What's next?” Too often the decisions die because there was no follow through.

An innovative agenda can enhance engagement and results. This list is meant to facilitate a dialog with the officers for better meeting outcomes.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com. Bill Pawlucy, CAE, provides tips and tools at www.AssociationOptions.com.