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How to Run an Effective Nonprofit Board Meeting | Tips & Best Practices

Nonprofit board meetings get a bad rap for being stressful, complicated events that require a lot of prep. While it's true that you should always prepare for a board meeting so it runs as smoothly as possible, there's no need to stress out with the right process in place. In this article, we'll walk you through the seven steps you need to run a successful board meeting, as well as the downsides of hosting ineffective board meetings.


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Systematically preparing for your next nonprofit board meeting not only eliminates stress but can actually improve your nonprofit's overall performance.

Your nonprofit board meetings don't have to be tiresome, infuriating, and stressful monthly (or quarterly) events. If run effectively, board meetings can move your nonprofit closer to its goals. They can provide support and encouragement to your staff. They can be worth every minute you spend planning for them.

So, how do you know your nonprofit board meetings are not run effectively?

If you look around and see board members discreetly texting, doodling, or mindlessly looking around, it's time for a change. If your board members are zoned out or are continuously going off-topic, it's time to shift your nonprofit board meeting strategy.

How to Run an Effective Nonprofit Board Meeting [7-Step Guide]

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1. Prepare the Board Meeting Agenda in Advance

Prepare your nonprofit board meeting agenda at least a month before the board meeting, and send an announcement reminder out to all board members along with the agenda for the upcoming meeting at least 7 days before.

Make sure to include any financial statements, reports, and other documents in the email, so that your board members have enough time to familiarize themselves with the information before the meeting. E.g. if your treasurer is going to talk about the budget, include a copy of it in the email. If your board chair is going to talk about the program growth, including a chart and a list of growth statistics. This will increase productivity during the meeting by reducing the time needed to present and review information. This packet must be well-organized, easy to read, and without superfluous materials.

Make the agenda detailed and strict, but make sure to include time for "new business" at the end of the meeting for items that aren't on the agenda.

2. Make Sure the Board Meeting Agenda is Strategic

Many nonprofits take the development of their board's meeting agenda for granted. It is often looked at as just a list of things to be covered in a meeting. However, a nonprofit board meeting agenda can be and is so much more.

A nonprofit board meeting should be, at least partially, strategic.

Although it's easy for a nonprofit board meeting to turn into a recap of information that could have easily been relayed via email, or for it to turn into a formality, there are simple things you can do to make your nonprofit board meeting agenda more strategic.

You could make sure you review one strategic goal during each board meeting (depending on the number of your strategic goals and the number of board meetings you have in a year). Otherwise, try to arrange your board's entire agenda around the strategic goals of your nonprofit.

Sometimes, it's difficult to make the change to the format of your board meeting, especially if your board members are used to the more routine format. In this case, it might be helpful to appoint one board member to be the 'strategy' responsible and remind the board to be more strategic during the meeting by asking: "How will this circumstance help us do a better job at achieving this strategic goal?"

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3. Make Sure the Board Meeting Agenda is Mission-Focused

For a nonprofit, achieving a mission is as important (some might even argue more important) than many other items that are regularly found on many nonprofits' board meeting agendas.

To keep your nonprofit board meeting agenda mission-focused, write your nonprofit mission statement on the top of the agenda so that everyone is constantly reminded of it. You could also have someone your nonprofit helped tell their story or a volunteer talk about a typical day in the field. This helps the board stay connected to your nonprofit's purpose.

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4. Start & End Your Nonprofit Board Meeting on Time

Board members tend to have packed schedules, which means it becomes increasingly easy to justify the behavior of being late. This often results in meetings constantly being pushed back and your board members arriving later and later. Always start your meetings on time!

Limit the length of meetings to two hours or less, if possible. After two hours, especially if you're holding the meeting in the evening, attention begins to drift. If you must go longer than two hours, take a break. Offering refreshments is always a good idea.

Likewise, make sure to end your nonprofit board meetings on time. This shows your board members you value their time.

5. Make the Meeting about Decisions & not Updates

Your nonprofit's board members are one of your most precious resources. Your nonprofit board members should be doing at least 80% of the talking during the meeting, and that talk should focus mostly on decisions and strategic discussions, not updates and staff reports (except for the absolutely necessary ones).

Many nonprofits find that their board meetings become so consumed with information overload, that they have difficulty making time for genuine dialogue and decision making on important issues. This takes away from discussions about long-term strategic goals and how the board can add value to your nonprofit.

Seek ways to minimize large information downloads and reporting. Instead, utilize a consent agenda for approval of routine items such as minutes, contracts, vetted policies, etc. The types of items that appear on a consent agenda are non-controversial items or routine items that are discussed at every meeting. Read more about the consent agenda here.

Very few people enjoy the idea of taking, preparing, distributing, and/or reviewing meeting minutes. However, if done appropriately for your nonprofit's needs, meeting minutes can be a very useful tool in keeping your board focused on the task at hand.

Distribute board meeting minutes **6. Take Board Meeting Minutes** to all meeting participants within 24 hours after each board meeting. This ensures action steps are fresh and solidified in everyone's mind, and it shows the board members you care.

To make the process smoother, get a copy of the meeting agenda and use it as a guide for taking notes and preparing the minutes – with the order and numbering of items on the minutes of the meeting matching those of the agenda. Get in the habit of highlighting actions and the person designated for completing them.

Here are some Nonprofit Board Minutes Best Practices:

- Record participants as they enter the room.
- Record decisions or notes on action items in your outline as soon as they occur to be sure you are recording them accurately.
- Ask for clarification if necessary.
- Don't go into too many details in your notes. The meetings should reflect the results of decisions, not who said what in the discussion.
- Avoid personal observations. The fewer adjectives or adverbs you use, the better. Don't use people's names except for motions and seconds.
- Use bold font to indicate strategic action plans and who will serve as the lead for each item.
- For meetings held via conference call, ask the board president to remind everyone to identify themselves by first and last name before contributing to the discussion.

- Make sure that some type of recording device is in place. This can serve as an excellent backup for your notes.
- Edit to ensure brevity and clarity.
- Keep the meeting minutes safely filed away.

Use your meeting minutes to prepare the next board meeting agenda. If you followed the tips above, it should be simple to review the status of various actions agreed upon at the previous meeting.

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7. Get a Good Nonprofit Board Chair

Your nonprofit board meeting agenda is your most important tool for running effective nonprofit board meetings. However, an agenda can only do as much. A crucial component of a successful board meeting is a good nonprofit board chair.

So, what are the qualities of a good board chair?

They need to have essential knowledge and understanding of your nonprofit's governance principles. To be effective, they also need to have experience and knowledge of your nonprofit's industry and operations. Besides that, board chairs must have the social skills and organizational skills to run a board meeting efficiently and effectively.

Board chairs need to be able to deal with multiple personalities and a variety of social situations. They should ideally be open, in order to hear all arguments and allow opinions to flow, but also firm, in order to facilitate the agenda and make sure everything runs smoothly and on time.

A board chair should also gently steer discussions and recognize those who contribute good suggestions. It is also their task to not let one or two board members dominate every board meeting.

Try rotating the role of the board chair in order to round out the talent of your board.

Additional Tips

- **Post an acronym chart.** Make a poster of frequently used external and internal acronyms and post it on the wall of every meeting.
- **Distribute name tags at every meeting**. It's easy for board members to forget each other's names, especially if the board meets rarely. Having name tags eliminates potential embarrassing situations for your board members.
- **Share some food.** Having a pot of coffee on and a plate of cookies, spreads, and crackers is good for setting a positive atmosphere. This works very well in helping build a social atmosphere that cultivates trust and the ability of the group to work together. However, be careful with board dinners! Most board members are reluctant to attend a purely social event unless there's some added value or work to be done.
- **Measure board effectiveness.** Depending on your nonprofit's culture, occasionally measure your board's effectiveness. Do this by offering meeting evaluation forms after each board session to get feedback on whether the meeting successfully achieved its goals or have the chair or president check-in for "satisfaction checks".

- **Thank your board.** Both the board chair and the President should send a 'thank you' email to each board member and every staff member who participated. The email should be waiting for them as soon as they arrive home or sit down at their desks first thing the following workday.

Risks of Having a Poorly Run Nonprofit Board Meeting

A poorly run nonprofit board meeting runs the risk of not contributing to the success of your nonprofit, or even hindering it.

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1. Mismanaged Board Meetings can Turn into a Mismanaged Board

A mismanaged board is damaging on its own, but it becomes worse when that information reaches the public.

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2. Poorly run Nonprofit Board Meetings Create Frustration & Confusion

Not preparing an effective nonprofit board meeting creates confusion and frustration amongst board members.

This can, in turn, contribute to low satisfaction amongst board members (that are often volunteering their time).

It can also confuse and frustrate members of staff.

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3. Ineffective Nonprofit Board Meetings Waste Time & Energy

Going off-topic, endless discussions, and irrelevant commentary plague all meetings, not just the nonprofit board meetings.

This can result in wasted time (and potential).

Final Thoughts

Boards are important.

They provide oversight, influence strategy, oversee management, and guard against undue risks or compliance violations. They may even direct programs, lead fundraising, and champion the organization. In the smallest nonprofits, the board *is* the organization. These are big responsibilities and important tasks to get right.

The most successful nonprofits know how to capitalize on their board members' strengths, knowledge, and commitment.

Therefore, it's crucial to get board meetings right. And a meeting agenda is your board's most important tool.

Having an established and focused board meeting agenda helps the board maximize accuracy, efficiency, and productivity.