

# Your Best Board Meeting Ever!

*An NLI workshop designed expressly for*

## **Public Allies Pittsburgh**

Wednesday, January 13, 2010

Michael Kumer

Executive Director, Nonprofit Leadership Institute

[kumer@duq.edu](mailto:kumer@duq.edu)

# Better Board Meetings

*John Kenneth Galbraith wrote: "Meetings are indispensable when you don't want to do anything."*

Board meetings or bored meetings?

What are meetings for?

Meetings in Three Modes

Agenda: request recommendations at least two weeks before the meeting

Forward the Agenda (and all reports) at least one week before the meeting

Zero-Based Reporting (in the meeting). What is the Consent Agenda?

Place items of critical importance high on the Agenda; place *pro forma* items low on the Agenda

# Better Board Meetings

Concentrate on a few key strategic issues; encourage decision-making; WKPUN

Forward the Minutes (1 – 2 pages) within one week following the meeting

Focus the Minutes on decisions and accountability: What? Who? When?

Devote part of each meeting to ongoing edu (governance best practices and/or about the organization's programs)

But what about fiduciary oversight?

Robert's Rules or Roberta's Rules?

Evaluate the meeting; use the results to improve future meetings.

Finally: location, attendance, seating, scheduling.

# Article

## TEN QUICK WAYS TO IMPROVE BOARD MEETINGS

by Jan Masaoka

When we think about the boards we're on, we usually think about the board meetings—which says a lot about the importance of having good meetings. Make a New Year's resolution to implement one of the following ideas each month:

1. Name tags for everyone, every meeting. It's embarrassing to have seen people at several meetings and wondered what their names are . . . and later it's REALLY hard to admit you don't know their names.
2. Post an acronym chart. Make a poster of frequently used external and internal acronyms (such as CDBG for Community Development Block Grants or DV for domestic violence) and post it on the wall of every meeting. (If you distribute the list on paper it is soon lost.)
3. Write an "anticipated action" for each agenda item. Examples: "Finance Committee report, brief questions and answers: no action needed." "Volunteer recruitment and philosophy: Anticipated Action: form committee of 3-4 board members." "Public Policy Committee: Anticipated Action: approve organizational statement to city council on zone changes."
4. Make sure that each person says at least one thing at every board meeting. This is the Chair's responsibility, but everyone should help! "Cecilia, you haven't spoken on this issue. I'm wondering what you're thinking about it?" "Matt, at the last meeting you made a good point about finances. Are there financial issues here that we aren't thinking about?"
5. No one-way communication from staff. If you have a regular Executive Director's Report on the agenda, or if a staff program director is giving you a briefing, be sure that such presentations need a response from the board. If not, put them in writing in the board packet and just ask if there are any questions.
6. Don't include committee reports on the agenda just to make the committees feel worthwhile. If a committee has done work but doesn't need it discussed, put the committee report in the board packet. (In the meeting be sure to recognize the committee's good work and refer people to the written report.) Instead, schedule committee reports in the context of the main discussion. For example, if there is a discussion planned on attracting and retaining staff, reports from the Finance Committee and the Personnel Committee may be appropriate.

# Article

7. Note to the board president and the executive director: what are the two most important matters facing the organization—economic downturn, changes in government funding, decreased preschool enrollment due to higher unemployment, a competitor organization, demographic changes in the county? Is one of these matters on every board agenda?
8. Encourage “dumb” questions, respectful dissent, authentic disagreements. Find a chance to be encouraging, at every meeting: “Sylvia, I’m glad you asked that ‘dumb’ question. I didn’t know the answer either.” “Duane, I appreciate the fact that you disagreed with me in that last discussion. Even though you didn’t convince me, your comment helped make the discussion much more valuable.”
9. Make sure the room is comfortable! Not too hot or cold or crowded. Offer beverages and something light to eat such as cookies or fruit.
10. Adjourn on time, or agree to stay later. Twenty minutes before the scheduled end of the meeting, the Chair should ask whether the group wants to stay later: “If we continue this very interesting discussion, we will have to stay fifteen extra minutes to hear the recommendation on the executive director’s salary. Can everyone stay that long, or should we end this discussion and move to that one immediately?”

BONUS: Once every year or two, survey the board about meetings. Pass out a questionnaire for anonymous return to the board vice president or secretary, asking, “What do you like best about board meetings? Least?” “Are you satisfied with the items that are usually on the agenda?” “How could the board president do more to encourage discussion at the meetings?” “Is the location or time of day difficult for you?”

Board Café readers: YOUR ideas on improving meetings? Let me know for future issues.

Related articles from the Board Café Archives:

The Strategic Board Agenda (Feb 00), [http://www.boardcafe.org/bc2000\\_02.html](http://www.boardcafe.org/bc2000_02.html)

Board Meeting Packets (Jan 01), [http://www.boardcafe.org/bc2001\\_01.html](http://www.boardcafe.org/bc2001_01.html) ·

Where Should the Board President and the Executive Director Sit? (Oct 99),

[http://www.boardcafe.org/bc1999\\_10.html](http://www.boardcafe.org/bc1999_10.html)

Consent Agenda (June 00), [http://www.boardcafe.org/bc2000\\_06.html](http://www.boardcafe.org/bc2000_06.html).

To find issues free on the web go to <http://www.boardcafe.org> and click on “Archived Issues.”

# Consent Agendas

Creating an efficient meeting agenda is an issue with which many chairs struggle. Standard, repetitive items often eat up the agenda and not enough time is left to focus on serious deliberation. Consent agendas are one way of liberating the allotted meeting time in order to concentrate on important issues requiring careful discussion. Board members become more actively engaged in preparing for the meeting and in deciding what the key issues are.

## **What is a consent agenda?**

A consent agenda, sometimes called a consent "calendar," is a component of a meeting agenda that enables the board to group routine items and resolutions under one umbrella. As the name implies, there is a general agreement on the procedure. Issues in this consent package do not need any discussion before a vote. Unless a board member requests a removal of an item ahead of time, the entire package is voted on at once without any additional explanations or comments. Because no questions or comments are allowed on the content, this procedure saves time.

## **What items should be included in a consent agenda?**

Routine, standard, non-controversial, and self-explanatory are adjectives that well describe consent agenda items. Here are some examples:

- Committee and previous board meeting minutes
- Office reports
- Routine correspondence
- Minor changes in a procedure (E-mail is added as an acceptable method of communication to announce a change in a meeting schedule)
- Routine revisions of a policy (Changes in dates or dollar amounts due to changes in laws)
- Updating documents (Address change for the main office)
- Standard contracts that are used regularly (Confirmation of using the traditional in-house contract with a new vendor)
- Confirmation of conventional actions that are required in the bylaws (Signatory authority for a bank account or acceptance of gifts)

# Consent Agendas

## How to make a consent agenda function efficiently

Information on the items to be included in a consent agenda is distributed to board members well ahead of the meeting. This allows thorough examination of the routine items without using up valuable meeting minutes. If a board member has a question, he or she can contact a referenced colleague to clarify a concern. If this is not helpful enough, during the meeting before a vote, any board member may request that an item from the consent agenda be removed and discussed separately. To keep the process intact and efficient, this is the only comment allowed concerning the contents of a consent agenda. To streamline the process even more, board members could be invited to contact the chair prior to the meeting to request that an item be removed.

## What precautions need attention?

As consent agendas are not yet automatically included in meeting procedures, their use needs to be well explained to all board members to ensure that everyone understands both the rationale and the steps involved. To achieve the objective of a consent agenda - to save valuable discussion time for meaningful issues - it is important to make sure that board members receive support materials well before voting, and that they familiarize themselves with the details. When putting the agenda together, the chair and the chief executive need to pay special attention to include only items that are suitable for mechanical processing. Board members need to be vigilant so that debatable issues do not accidentally pass through without appropriate deliberation.

## References:

Flynn, Outi. *Meet Smarter: A Guide to Better Nonprofit Board Meetings*. BoardSource 2004. Available [online](#) or by calling 800-883-6262.

# Board Meeting Evaluation

	OK	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
The agenda was clear, supported by the necessary documents, and circulated prior to the meeting.			
All board members were prepared to discuss materials sent in advance.			
Reports were clear and contained needed information.			
We avoided getting into administrative/management details.			
A diversity of opinions was expressed and issues were dealt with in a respectful manner.			
The chair guided the meeting effectively, and members participated responsibly.			
Next steps were identified and responsibility assigned.			
All board members were present.			
The meeting began and ended on time.			
The meeting room was conducive to work.			

The Board Meeting Rescue Kit: 20 Ideas for Jumpstarting Your Board Meeting.  
 Published by BoardSource  
 © 2001