



BOARD WORKS

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◆ INGREDIENTS OF A PRODUCTIVE BOARD MEETING

By: Lee Schmucker, MHS Consulting Associate

In their book The High Performance Board: Principles of Nonprofit Governance (2002), authors James E. Orlikoff and Dennis D. Pointer make a bold claim that “Governance really matters. A board has significant impact on an organization’s success or the lack thereof.” While this assertion may seem intimidating, it’s an important reminder that good board work is intentional and takes energy by all board members.

Productive board meetings significantly impact an organization’s success because a board governs only as a unit and only when in session. A board’s primary resources to govern are its meeting time and board member talents. Good board work is based on good group process, such as open dialogue, active listening, open mind, focused exploration, quality decisions.

Here are 10 ingredients that contribute to effective board meetings.

1. **Plan the meeting agenda and process.** The board chair and executive collaborate on identifying the topics that the board should address and developing the agenda. A proactive agenda guides board member preparation and meeting process so that time and energy is focused on the significant topics. Items to include on the agenda:
 - a. Topic
 - b. Desired outcome, e.g. inform, counsel, explore, educate or decide
 - c. An estimate of time allocated for each agenda item
2. **Come ready to contribute.** Supporting documents should be reviewed by the board prior to the meeting so that meeting time is devoted primarily to process rather than hearing reports and proposals. Preparation also involves healthy self-care practices by board members in order to be ready physically, mentally, emotionally, and relationally.
3. **Get to know each other.** It’s unnatural to have open, collaborative, and sometimes difficult discussions with persons you don’t know well or dislike. Invest time in building relationships and appreciating members’ talents and passions. Try starting each board meeting by connecting personally before jumping into board work – connecting as people first promotes better group interaction. An informal gathering time with a snack or meal, or an opening question could focus the connection (i.e., family updates, highlights, prayer requests, and sources of personal passion for serving on this ministry board).
4. **Nurture healthy relationships and open communication between board members and the executive.** Respect the boundaries and responsibilities that have been agreed upon for the executive and board.

Signs of poor board process

Poor process produces ineffective board work. Have you experienced these signs of poor process?

- Meeting is predictable and mechanical
- Discussions are dominated by a few
- Silence is assumed to be agreement
- Assumptions are not investigated
- Members fight for personal ideas/agenda rather than collaborate about what is best for the organization
- Hard questions or opinions are shared outside of the meeting, sometimes called the “parking lot meeting”
- The board regularly either rubberstamps or micromanages
- The chair is blamed for what’s wrong with meetings
- Members open their packet when they arrive at the meeting
- The majority of board time is spend listening to reports

5. **Streamline the fiduciary function.** Oversight is an important function of boards; however, oversight can easily slide into scrutinizing every number and micromanaging. Agree on the key performance indicators for your organization, creating a scorecard or dashboard. This regular report lets the board know how the key performance areas are trending.
6. **Build time into the agenda for strategic thinking.** Include education about market changes, client feedback, potential client expectations, funding, etc. Anticipate future demands and explore possibilities ahead, without needing any decisions now.
7. **Cultivate a culture of inquiry** where questions are welcomed as opportunities to learn and explore. A governance speaker said, “The best boards ask good questions. It’s questions and process that are transforming.”
8. **Embrace disagreement** or conflicting opinions as a source of potential creativity. Test assumptions for accuracy. Keep the debate focused on achieving the desired outcome of the issue, not focused on the personalities involved. New possibilities can emerge through an open and energetic process.
9. **Insert meeting “energizers”** to stimulate good process and increase involvement. For example, break into pairs or triads to explore a topic or identify questions, stand during a small group assignment, or add variety to information-sharing and process through pictures, charts, objects, and stakeholder interviews or story-telling.
10. Before closing, **reflect on the quality of the meeting.** Was the time used well? What worked and what could have made it better? Did discussion and decisions align with the organization’s mission and values?

◆ FOR DISCUSSION

1. What would you include in a list of ingredients for a productive meeting?
2. Which of the techniques could strengthen your board meetings?

OUR VISION

To be a community of vibrant Anabaptist health and human service ministries committed to God’s work of healing and hope in Jesus Christ.

OUR MISSION

MHS Alliance strengthens and extends Anabaptist health and human service ministries in faithfully and effectively fulfilling their missions.

For further information or to suggest topics for future issues of Board Works, please contact MHS Alliance at Emily@mhsonline.org.



1112 N. Main Street
Goshen, IN 46528
Phone: 574.534.9689
Fax: 574.534.3254
Web Site: <http://www.mhsonline.org>