

From the Nonprofit Board Chair Seat

Are you a nonprofit Board Chair who has a board development or management issue, concern or challenge keeping you up at night (and who doesn't)? Let me know. I'll try to provide a response that can help you sleep better. So, please, send your questions to: mikbrns2@aol.com.. This on-going column is dedicated to questions and answers to simple and complex nonprofit governance challenges.

Question: How can I make my board meetings more than the tedious, obligatory, drudge of time board members mutter under their breath about when they refer to meetings?

Answer: I am going to offer two of the many solutions being employed in creating productive meetings. The first solution: make meeting work or focus parallel with what is the work of the board. The second solution: structure each agenda item with a clear purpose and result.

For the first solution, making meeting work parallel the work of the board I propose defining the work to be consistent with what Chait, Ryan and Taylor, described in their seminal work, "Governance as Leadership": fiduciary, strategic and generative.

Fiduciary (fulfilling legal duties of care, loyalty and obedience) traditionally tends to be the largest focus of board meetings borne out in discussions about finances and

program results (or sadly, activities). Note: these are not the singular focus of fiduciary conversations but we can explore more about that in a future column. Dashboards are an important tool for monitoring fiduciary and strategic matters.

Strategic discussions are just that: focused on framing and plotting the future in conversations that are multi-year, results-focused and informed by data. Assessing the status of strategic decisions are a part of these types of discussions. Again, a dashboard but also live reports from staff and even those who benefit from your work.

Finally, generative conversations include the board's engaging in dialogue focused on "thinking out of the box" to either consider new or alternative approaches to fulfilling the strategic plan and/or addressing strategic (environmental or really "big" internal) issues. Input from staff, customers and the community can be helpful.

Once you have agreed upon meeting (item) focus, you can turn to how to define the purpose of each agenda item. I believe there to be three possibilities:

- a. Inform (members) for fiduciary purposes and/or for future decisions;
- b. Engage (members) in discussions to understand the organization and its work and issues (again, as fodder for future decisions and

- c. including story telling from staff and clients); and,
- c. Take action.

In summary, the results of board meetings agenda items should include members' becoming informed; discussion in preparation of decisions, and decisions. The focus of each agenda item: fiduciary, strategic and generative matters.

While we would like to think that board members come prepared for meetings, staff should ensure that whatever is presented at meetings is clear and in essence re-prepares members to be fully engaged. Graphics and stories help, a lot!

One proviso: an organization's stage of development can affect what constitutes the work of the board. A young, non-staffed board needs to pay attention to day-to-day matters, often not paying attention to fiduciary and other board matters. The solution: divide meetings so that "board work" has its own time on the schedule and the non-board work (managing and operations) has its time. This will ensure that in the future, as the board matures, the board work will become the only work.

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