

17 Tips for Productive Board Meetings

1. **The chair and executive director plan the agenda together.** One should draft and the other should provide feedback/comment.
2. **The agenda should list the time allowed and anticipated action** for each agenda item, so that board members know what is expected of them and how long they have to deliberate a topic.
3. **The agenda shouldn't just be topics,** it should be topics, specific questions to resolve under the topic, and any action items expected to involve a board vote.
4. **Focus agenda on governance (fiduciary, strategic, generative), not volunteer tasks.** Focus agendas on topics that relate to the board fulfilling its fiduciary role (dollars in or out, law, ethics), strategic role (long-term questions about mission, programs, etc.), and generative role (helping staff make sense of the world and the challenges it faces). Those are topics where it's important to have the board in the room together. If a topic is about a volunteer task that has no governance component, it probably belongs outside a board meeting, unless most of the board is involved and coordination is critical.
5. **Spend some time at each meeting on one big picture generative subject.** These are the topics that will bring out the board's creativity and passion. Create and maintain a list of the big topics that are future-oriented and thought-provoking. Make sure at least one topic at each board meeting is from the list.
6. **Place as much focus on important topics as urgent (e.g. time-sensitive) topics.** Don't miss out on tackling the really important topics because you get caught up talking about time-sensitive, but unimportant topics.
7. **Don't cram in too many topics/questions.** Better to cover fewer topics well than rush through too many topics.
8. **Use a consent agenda for routine business.** Save time for important items by using a consent agenda in which routine business can be approved together in a single vote without discussion. Items often include minutes, as well as committee and staff reports. Board members can ask that an item be taken out of the consent agenda and be placed on the agenda for discussion.

9. **The agenda and supporting materials should be distributed ahead of time.** For most groups, 7 days in advance is an appropriate target.
10. **Use written committee and staff reports.** Nothing is more boring (and time-consuming) than listening to report after report. Place all **board committee and staff reports in the board packet** and discuss during the meeting only those that involve a decision or some item that a board member wants discussed or explained.
11. **Staff reports should be short and keep the audience in mind.** In writing them, staff should ask: what does the board need to know to govern, rather than providing a compendium of all relevant information.
12. **Actively facilitate the meetings.** Ideally, this is the board chair. If necessary, staff need to figure out how to facilitate without “chairing” the meeting. Active facilitation keeps people on the agenda, avoids any one or two people dominating, and move things along if the conversation is becoming repetitious or more time is being spent than is justified by the topic’s importance.
13. **Hold in an appropriate room** with comfortable seating, good speakerphone capability (if there will be remote participation), and snacks/drinks.
14. **Spend time getting to know one another so that the board can be a team.** Social time is important for board members since personal relationships are important to a well-functioning team. Find ways to talk before or after meetings. Alternatively, have 5 minute icebreakers in which board members begin the meeting in pairs/triads talking about what inspires them to be involved.
15. **Adjourn on time** or agree to stay later. Twenty minutes before the scheduled end of the meeting, with more still on the agenda, if the board is in a lively discussion, the chair or Executive Director should pause the meeting and say, “If we continue this discussion, we will have to stay another fifteen minutes. Can everyone stay or should we table this item and finish up any other essential agenda items?”
16. **Produce both formal minutes and informal report on next steps/commitments.** In addition to formal minutes reflecting votes of the board on selected topics, someone should produce a more informal record of what transpired and who volunteered to do what, by when. While formal minutes can wait a few weeks before being produced, the informal record should be done as soon as feasible.
17. **Evaluate** board meetings. Seek feedback so you can learn how to improve future meetings.