

BoardBrief

Prepared for Colorado Hospital Association Trustees

Meetings People Remember - For the Right Reasons

Hospital leaders must navigate through a complex health care environment that continues to come under increasing examination and debate. The lingering effects of the economic recession, calls for increased transparency, scrutiny of health care costs and quality, changing reimbursement systems and the uncertainty of health care transformation mean that boards today, more than ever, must focus their time and attention on the most critical issues confronting their organizations. Board meetings should begin with prepared participants, follow a meticulously-planned agenda, and include respectful, friendly exchanges of ideas and calm deliberations. Meetings should be conducted by a procedure-savvy chair, maintain clear direction and decisive votes, and end on time. If this does not quite describe your board's meetings, read on...

The truth is, the time a governing board spends together in its meetings can make or break its effectiveness. Great board meetings set the tone for hospital success..

Everyone arrives having done their homework, they know the issues they'll be discussing and voting upon, they're committed to treating one another in a civil manner, and they deliberate calmly. If the discussion should ever get boisterous, their chair skillfully brings them back to order, refocuses the discussion, and calls for a vote. When the gavel signaling adjournment falls, board members clap one other on the back and congratulate themselves on another productive meeting.

It may sound like a dream, but it's a fact that your governing board meetings can move just as smoothly and productively.

Best Practice Number One: The Meeting Starts Before the Meeting

Board members should arrive at meetings well-prepared, having received their board packet – including the agenda, previous meeting minutes, board reports, and supporting materials – at least a week ahead of the board meeting. As committed board members, every trustee will have read and studied the entire packet, prepared ideas to propose during discussion periods, and arrived at the board table on time.

Too often, board members arrive five minutes early (or late!) and try to speed-read their packet information before

discussions begin. This practice makes it nearly impossible for them to be equipped with the background information they need to discuss agenda items intelligently, and their lack of detailed knowledge can cloud any vote they may cast during the meeting's progress.

Takeaway tips: Read and study the board agenda several days prior to the board meeting. If you have questions, call the board chair for clarification. Clarify your thinking on each scheduled agenda item and arrive prepared for discussion and deliberation. And always be sure to arrive on time.

Best Practice Number Two: A Great Agenda Sets the Stage

Sketchy agendas, or agendas with catchall phrases such as "New Business," "Old Business," or "Other Business" do no one any favors. A well-planned agenda can keep a meeting focused and on time. It can keep discussions from derailing and keep your members on task.

Here's what a clear agenda contains:

- Time, date and location of the meeting.
- Items being considered, with brief notation of action expected, such as "discussion only," "information only," or "vote to be taken."

- A suggested time for each item's discussion (in minutes).
- Items of greatest importance placed at the beginning of the meeting; items of lesser importance near the end.

Use of a consent agenda preserves limited board meeting time for the most important issues and helps to keep meetings on track. A consent agenda is an "agenda within an agenda," containing items that rarely need discussion. Most consent agendas include approval of minutes, approval of agenda, the chief executive's report and various committee reports. On occasion, a consent agenda might include legal documents such as leases or contracts that have already been agreed upon, but need formal approval. A consent agenda gathers all of these "low or no discussion" items into a group, and a vote is taken at the meeting's outset either giving "consent" to unilaterally approve the entire group of items, or to pull one or two items out for clarification and discussion. It's assumed that all board members have read the items included in the consent agenda prior to the meeting.

Takeaway tips: Pay close attention to your agenda. Note the items that will be discussed and the time allotted for discussion. Come to the meeting with your ideas and thoughts prepared. Expect to spend more time on items of greatest importance, and little time on administrative tasks. Expect to approve the consent agenda, or be ready to ask that one or more items be removed from it for further discussion.

Best Practice Number Three: Treat Others as You Want to be Treated

The cardinal rule of boardroom etiquette is: Treat your fellow board members as you want to be treated. Learn to agree – and disagree – courteously. Speak up, stating your opinions and ideas concisely. Don't interrupt and be mindful not to dominate a discussion. Be willing to listen to others' opinions, and perhaps even change your mind if you hear a reasonable alternative to a tough issue. If you feel yourself getting hot under the collar, remember your mission to serve the hospital and the community.

Boardroom etiquette and courtesy are often "taught" in board orientation. In addition, a tremendous aid to keeping the meeting discussions and deliberations civil is for each board member to have a working knowledge of parliamentary procedure.

While reviewing etiquette may seem trivial, it helps set the stage for meaningful deliberation and dialogue, and for building positive working relationships between and amongst

trustees. Great boards also conduct ongoing member performance evaluations, which may bring to light bullying or disruptive behaviors that must be addressed.

Takeaway tips: Respect others' right to speak, and listen to their ideas. Expect others to do the same for you. Be calm. Be collaborative. Keep your temper. If you disagree with someone, discuss the idea, don't belittle the person. Learn the basics of parliamentary procedure. It can help keep your meeting friendly, respectful and focused.

Best Practice Number Four: Elect an Organized and Focused Leader

A skillful board chair can bring efficiency and order to the most chaotic of situations. If emergency action is needed on a particular issue, a skillful board chair will concisely state the challenge, the background to the issue at hand, and signal the beginning of deliberation. If one board member is dominating a discussion, a skillful board chair will remind the group of the importance of all voices being heard and call upon others for their opinions. If a board member consistently remains silent and does not offer ideas or opinions, a skillful board chair can draw them out, urge their participation, and ask for their thoughts on an issue. If a discussion veers off course, a skillful board chair will bring it back into focus and keep tabs on the timing of the discussion.

Some boards may find they spend more time discussing past accomplishments or the "good old days" than they do deliberating over more pressing and difficult issues. A skillful board chair may remind them of health care planner and futurist Ian Morrison's words, "If you don't think systematically about the future, you run the risk of not participating in it."

Takeaway tips: Elect, appreciate and support a skillful board chair. Expect to participate equitably in meetings, or receive a phone call from the chair asking you to either tone it down or step it up. Expect the chair to keep discussions focused, on time, and strategic.

Best Practice Number Five: Know Your Deliberative and Decision-Making Processes and How they Work

Deliberation is one of the key roles of a governing board—it's where decisions are formed before decisive votes are taken. Excellent deliberation always begins with a written definition of the challenge before the group, stated in neutral words with key points highlighted. The issue or challenge should tie directly back to the hospital's strategic plan and will be of

importance to the hospital and/or the community. The chair details what the deliberation should accomplish, re-stating the objectives. He/she keeps the discussion on target, making certain every person shares opinions and is heard from. Solutions are proposed and alternatives are suggested, leading to a vote being taken or scheduled for the next meeting.

There are several models of decision-making, and board members must understand how their particular board utilizes each method. In the consensus model, agreement is reached after all alternatives are on the table, and the group arrives at one opinion. In some instances, the “majority rule” model is employed, where a simple majority decides the issue. In other instances, the board calls for a decision to be made by a super-majority, in which at least 51 percent of participants carrying the motion. Other forms of majority rule are a 2/3 requirement, and on occasion, 3/4. Sometimes, the full board simply approves decisions reached by the executive committee, although “rubber-stamping” of all such opinions is not a good practice.

Takeaway tips: Know how the deliberative process works, and be prepared to participate. Help ensure that all members are heard from. Know which decision-making models apply in various situations within your board. Do not abstain from voting unless a conflict of interest applies.

Best Practice Number Six: The First Five Minutes After the Meeting Count Too

Many boards pack up and leave the moment adjournment is announced. If you knew your board meetings could become more energized and effective if you gave just five more minutes of your time, would you offer them?

Even boards that conduct the most efficient and effective meetings fine-tune their meeting work through the use of

Overview: Six Best Practices for Building Better Meetings

- 1 The meeting starts before the meeting
- 2 A great agenda sets the stage
- 3 Treat others as you want to be treated
- 4 Elect an organized and focused leader
- 5 Know and practice deliberative and decision-making processes
- 6 The first five minutes after the meeting count too

individual board meeting evaluations. These evaluations are designed to be completed in five minutes or less, and include yes/no questions with room for suggestions. Simple questions might include: Did the meeting follow the agenda? Was the agenda focused on the most critical or strategic issues? Did we start and end on time? Were all members participating in an active manner? Did the board chair lead the meeting skillfully? Comments could also be sought regarding the helpfulness of board packet materials, meeting direction and focus, issues as they relate to the strategic plan, fairness of deliberations, and a sense of whether each member left the meeting believing it was a valuable use of their time.

Takeaway tips: Prepare a short meeting evaluation for every board member to anonymously complete prior to leaving. The board chair and the CEO will utilize information from the evaluations to fine-tune the board’s meeting process.

Many of the reminders presented here are common sense solutions and known by most, but practiced by few. By implementing the six best practices of efficient board meetings, your board can achieve meetings that are highly productive, energetic, inspiring and enhance learning. Your meetings will be memorable – for the RIGHT reasons.

Sources and Additional Information

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4. Helping Boards Make Good Decisions. *BoardSource*. October 2005.