

CHAIRPERSON'S CHECKLIST FOR GREAT MEETINGS

By Nathan Garber

“Meetings are indispensable when you don't want to do anything!”

That statement by John Kenneth Galbraith sums up how many people feel about the meetings they attend. Sometimes, though, we are lucky enough to be on a board or committee where we leave meetings with a deep sense of accomplishment and appreciation for our colleagues. Why can't we have more meetings like that? The answer, I believe, lies primarily in the care and attention given to the meeting by the chairperson. While everyone has an important role to play in creating great meetings, no one is more important than the chairperson.

Ideally, the chairperson should be chosen for the knowledge and ability to plan and manage meetings so that every participant understands their role and performs it well. Unfortunately, however, the chairperson is frequently selected by default and doesn't realize that it's possible to make meetings effective, efficient, and fun. Having great meetings requires careful planning and a fair amount of work between meetings but it's within the grasp of every chairperson who's willing to make the effort.

If, as an officer of a nonprofit organization, you are expected to chair meetings, here are some things you can do to make sure that your business gets done, that everyone gets their say, and that participants will look forward to the next meeting.

Before the Meeting

1. There are many things you might want to do at a meeting, but meetings are first and foremost for making decisions. Be sure you understand what decisions have to be made at the meeting.
2. Effective meetings require agendas, and everyone needs to know what's on the agenda. Make sure that reports and information necessary to make the needed decisions are sent with the agenda to board or committee members in sufficient time for them to be read.
3. Plan the agenda to ensure that the most important and most time-critical decisions are made first.
4. Contact individuals scheduled to make a verbal report and make sure they will be present or will appoint someone else to give the report.
5. Note when someone comes unprepared to the meeting. Call them in advance of the next meeting with a reminder to read and think about the agenda items before the meeting.

6. The board or committee can be severely handicapped when members are absent. If you have reason to think that any member is not making a serious effort to attend all meetings, call them to find out why.

At the Meeting

1. Use a "Consent Agenda" to dispense quickly with routine and non-controversial agenda items.
2. Rules of order are important to ensure that decisions are made fairly and that the rights of the majority and minorities are protected. Make sure that the rules you follow encourage adequate discussion and participation.
3. Start meetings on time. Take note of members who arrive late and call them before the next meeting to find out if there is anything you can do to make it easier for them to arrive on time.
4. Introduce and welcome all newcomers and guests. Introductions should be more than just their names. Use introductions to enable participants to get to know each other.
5. Summarize the issues to be discussed and clarify the time-line for discussion.
6. Keep a speakers list. Make sure that everyone who wishes to speak has done so before any speaker has a second opportunity.
7. Make sure that the quiet ones have an opportunity to speak. Direct questions to them or go around the table. Be alert to nonverbal behaviours signifying dissent or fatigue.
8. Be alert for discussion that wanders away from the issue and bring it back to the topic.
9. When debate becomes confrontational and positions become entrenched, seek ways to identify the interests and values that underlie the positions and seek ways to negotiate resolution.
10. Watch for signs that the debate has run its course. Then summarize the discussion and ask for a vote or expression of consensus.
11. Ask the secretary to read all motions and amendments to be sure that they are clear and express the intent of the mover.
12. Before the meeting is adjourned (or before people start leaving), make sure that anyone who has been assigned a task is clear on their responsibilities and aware of the reporting date.
13. Check to see if anyone has a problem with the next meeting date and time.
14. End the meeting on time.

After the Meeting

1. Just because the meeting is over, don't think that your job is done.
2. Review the previous meetings to identify problems so that they can be addressed before the next meeting.
3. Review the yearly agenda to see what is coming up in the months ahead. Update the

annual agenda if necessary. This will help you plan the next meeting agenda and will be a great help to the next chairperson.

4. Consider what you might do to make the next meeting better, and what long-term strategies might improve your meetings.
5. Consider what you might do to deal with absenteeism, remedy poor performance or assist new members.
6. If you have a vice-chairperson or if there is someone in line for the chairperson's role, include her or him in this review process.

If this seems like a lot of work -- it is! But the work decreases over time, and the payoffs are large. Good meeting management will make for a more productive board, more satisfied board members, and a stronger organization.

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