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THE BEST BOARD MEETING I EVER ATTENDED

The executive in charge of board development for a large national philanthropic organization with more than 100 regional boards recently asked me, “What’s the best board meeting you ever attended?” Got me to thinking...No, it wasn’t chaired by me. Yes, it was one of my clients. Here’s what it looked like:

1. CONSENT AGENDA

The monthly meeting began online and 10 days prior to the physical meeting with approval of the consent agenda, which included the CEO report and several updates from key staff members. Proper use of the consent agenda moves dialogue to the more vital issues rather than to the information inherent in every board packet that simply requires a read-through and consent.

2. MEETING AGENDA

The most important business and strategic issues were first on the formal agenda, and the rest was in descending order — no more “old business” “new business” stuff. Yes, it appears a bit radical and divergent from “Robert’s Rules,” but those “rules” are ancient history to today’s high-performance board where the agenda moves from financial to strategic to operations in that order.

3. DASHBOARD FINANCIALS

The financial report — the first business item on the agenda — was presented as a one-page, color-coded (green, yellow, red) dashboard of key financial indicators that the board had developed a few years earlier. This “at-a-glance” approach allows the board to scan the identified key indicators for monthly and year-to-date performance to budget as well as a past year comparison. The dashboard confirmed no exceptions to the monthly financials, was motioned for approval by the finance committee chair, and approved and documented in the minutes. The days of several pages of financials for board review are gone. The finance committee does the deep dive into the details as necessary and reports exceptions or recommendations to the entire board. No more distracting board members with an explanation of why postage jumped last month.

4. BOARD SUCCESSION

A “Governance Leadership Succession” agenda item followed with a discussion of the cadre of potential future board members the board had identified and engaged. Conversation focused on the three top candidates for two positions that would open in nine months and how they fit the desired profile. While executive leadership succession has reached the radar screen for most boards, governance leadership succession still lags behind. I conducted a special educational session at this organization’s last board retreat on how to go about this due diligence; they now are tracking progress quarterly on early identification and development of next generation board members.

5. REDUCED JIBBER-JABBER

Board members had read the board packet, and their contributions were cogent and to the issue. No repeating what other board members had said. No drifting off into “administrivia” — they kept a hard focus on the matters at hand and a soft focus on dealing with one another. Through self-assessment and governance coaching, they had learned to quiet the unnecessary trivial chatter and redundant comments that seeps into many less-disciplined meetings. They saved space for meaningful dialogue later during the “strategic update” segment of the meeting, which accounts for 50 to 75 percent of meeting time in high-performance governance.

6. EXECUTIVE SUMMARIES

Staff and committee presentations/recommendations were in “executive summary” one-page formats. Background information had been provided on the board section of the Web site for those who wished more detailed

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information. This jump-started the board discussion on action vs. the history of how we got there. The executive summaries included a highlight of key historical points and a few typical frequently asked questions relevant to governance decision making.

An executive summary approach to reports can be expected to cut substantial time off board deliberation by enabling you get to the point and not waste time on irrelevant curiosity about benign details.

7. STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

Thirty minutes into the agenda, the board had completed its “business oversight” (fiduciary accountability) and moved on to a significant strategic issue. This allowed 45 minutes of dialogue about the continued relevance of the strategy, updates on progress, new data points / information relative to the strategy, confirmation of continued importance, and recommitment to tactics, timing, and resources. This conversation was “generative” in that it focused on the creation of ideas and the development of new perspectives on strategy.

This is where the board had time for expansive dialogue (not simply discussion), allowing for thorough understanding and creative input. The 40 minutes saved by the consent agenda (approximately 10 minutes for most boards), the financial dashboard, exception reporting (a savings of approximately 15 minutes for most boards), and those “executive summaries” (causing conversation to jump-start in decision mode and saving another estimated 15 minutes) came in handy! It was reinvested in rigorous strategic dialogue.

8. BOARD DEVELOPMENT

The meeting ended with a short board development segment focused on the discussion of a governance article on the board’s role in enterprise risk management that the members had read in advance. This 15- minute segment of the agenda directly related to board development goals established during the annual strategic planning retreat and was based on the results of the board’s most recent annual self-assessment. This board includes time for board development in every agenda – sometimes separate, as with this meeting or frequently embedded in the “strategic review” segment of the agenda.

9. IMMEDIATE ASSESSMENT

Finally, using an old concept from good meetings practices, each board member completed a quick evaluation survey of the meeting, answering three open-ended questions: 1. Are you leaving the meeting confident in the overall performance of our organization? 2. Did you feel you had ample opportunity for input? 3. Would you change anything for future meetings?

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