



On the Board: Keep on Track

Common Ground (March/April 2010)

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Because of his busy work schedule, the association board president can't give much thought to board meetings until he gets to one. John typically arrives at the meeting just in time. That's not a problem because the board meets nearby at another board member's home. Members visit over snacks before moving to the living room for their meeting.

To accommodate latecomers, John starts the meeting about 15 minutes late. "So what do we need to do next?" he asks the association manager. He keeps asking this question throughout the meeting.

He is a real stickler for procedure and requires a motion, a second and a vote for all issues before the board, even routine matters. Meetings can last up to three hours, depending on what new issues board members raise and how long or how many times they want to talk.

What's wrong with this scenario? If you are content with long, disorganized and unproductive meetings, stop reading now. If you prefer shorter, more effective board meetings, here are 10 tips for doing better than this board president.

Plan the meeting. No single effort saves more time during meetings than planning ahead. What needs to be

accomplished at the meeting? Who is responsible for each item? Have minutes of the previous meeting, the agenda and other necessary documents been provided to each board member?

At a minimum, a president should have a general outline of a meeting. Parliamentary books such as Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised recognize a standard order of business, which includes:

- Opening the meeting. The president should officially call the meeting to order by saying, "The meeting will come to order."
- Approving the minutes.
- Reports. The manager or committee chairs should only be called on if they have something to report. No vote is needed unless action is recommended.
- Unfinished business. Unfinished business includes any motion that was not resolved at the previous meeting.
- New business. Members can introduce new items for consideration.
- Closing the meeting. In most bodies, the president can adjourn the meeting by asking, "Is there any objection to adjourning the meeting?"

Hearing no objection, the meeting is adjourned.”

Pick the right location. Typically, meetings in a relaxed setting tend to be relaxed about everything, including the meeting’s length. That’s fine. But does meeting in a board member’s living room give the right impression to a homeowner appealing a rules violation? A large association may want to present itself like the business it is. If you don’t have an on-site meeting room, you can find free or low-cost rooms at a library or place of worship.

A room’s layout also should be considered. Auditorium seating usually leads to less participation by board members. In contrast, a circle of chairs can invite too much discussion. Some boards prefer U-shaped seating, which encourages participation, but acknowledges the president is running the meeting.

Start on time. The president should arrive early to be better prepared to tackle the evening’s business. Delaying a meeting encourages board members to arrive late and punishes those who are on time.

Prepare an agenda. An agenda is more detailed than an “order of business” and lists the specific items that will be discussed during the meeting. Well-planned agendas make for shorter meetings that seem effortless.

At a minimum, an agenda should list the order in which items will be discussed. If there are several important items, prioritize them. Some boards prefer agendas be prepared in advance and used as a guide. Other boards adopt the agenda at the beginning of the meeting, locking in the discussion items and sequence.

Boards needing serious intervention may wish to consider a timed agenda, which gives a start and end time for each item. Such scheduling helps rein in long discussions, allowing several controversial items to be addressed. The president should announce when time has expired and wrap up the matter.

Set an adjournment time. At a minimum, an agenda should list the time the meeting will adjourn. This will force the board to use its time more efficiently. Some boards plan their meetings to fit a set time, such as 90 minutes. They cover more important issues first and carry over items not addressed to the next meeting.

Use informal procedures when you can. Robert’s Rules notes that strict procedures can actually hinder business for boards with fewer than 12 members. For example, it recommends smaller boards not require a second on each motion and allow the chair to make motions.

Even during informal meetings, boards may wish to be more formal on matters of great importance or controversy. For example, they may want to observe limits on debate to keep the meeting on schedule or vote formally to help avoid legal challenges.

Use unanimous consent. A great time-saver for routine items is unanimous consent. Boards often use it to adopt routine reports, approve minutes or end debate. On noncontroversial matters, the president can ask if there is any objection to approving the item. If no one objects, it is approved. If a member objects, the president can ask for a motion and a vote.

Some boards even use a “consent agenda” at the beginning of a meeting that includes all noncontroversial items, such as approving minutes. Any board member can

remove an item and place it on the regular agenda for consideration and a vote. The board then approves the remaining items on the consent agenda unanimously without discussion.

Require new business in advance.

If board members never know how long meetings will last, it's probably because they don't know what issues will be raised. Require them to submit their new business items in advance. Allowing members to bring up issues at the meeting can lead to poorly thought-out motions. The board can allow new business to be brought up for the first time at the meeting as a late item (by suspending the rule) or carry it over to the next meeting.

Manage discussion. Encourage new discussion and prevent repetition by asking for comments from those speakers who have

not spoken. Seek alternative views. After hearing from a proponent, ask if anyone opposed to the motion would like to speak. When members digress, note that their comments aren't relevant to the discussion and promise to take it up at a later date.

Limit discussion. Set the discussion time prior to addressing any potentially controversial or important issues. You can do this with a motion to limit total debate to a specified number of minutes. Such a motion generally requires a two-thirds vote. When discussion is no longer fruitful, ask for a motion to close the debate. Most parliamentary books allow debate to be closed with a two-thirds vote.

By following these simple suggestions, you can help keep your board on track, making meetings shorter, more effective and less burdensome.

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