Smooth sailing into your next board meeting

By: Jennifer Chandler

We know that when board meetings roll around there sometimes can be a bit of…tension in the air, right? The last thing we want is for volunteer board members to leave a meeting feeling frustrated that the agenda didn't tackle important topics, or that "nothing got done," or their time was wasted. Planning a smooth and effective board meeting takes time. Here are five ideas to fill the sails and send your nonprofit on its way!

1. **Energize**: As you plan the agenda, think how you can keep the energy level high throughout the meeting. For instance, pair a longer strategic discussion with a focused resolution that you've teed up and are confident will be approved. Then celebrate when the board passes the motion with a stretch break, or pass the cookie plate! Expressions of gratitude will create energy in the boardroom. When there has been a special accomplishment, or you know a board member will be attending his/her final meeting, include a resolution in the agenda expressing gratitude. Thanking outgoing board members for their service to the nonprofit is not only the right thing to do, but an expression of appreciation will energize the rest of the board and remind them about their own commitments to the nonprofit's mission. Other ideas: experiment with the

layout of the board room to encourage conversations; hold occasional meetings in different physical locations; find out what works and what doesn't. At the end of each board meeting ask board members to share constructive comments on an index card, sharing "*What were the highlights of the meeting? Any suggestions*?"

2. **Keep your eye on the ball**: As you are planning the agenda, be clear about the goal(s) of the meeting – not just the motions you hope will be approved, but the underlying goals of engaging your board with the mission. Every board meeting ideally will remind each board member why the nonprofit makes a positive difference. Intentionally align agenda items with the organization's strategic initiatives so board members see and feel momentum towards the mission. Some nonprofits use place cards at board meetings with names of board members facing out, and the mission typed on the side facing each board member. You've probably heard about nonprofits that share a "mission moment" with their boards each meeting. Why not take that concept one step further and ask different board members to share their personal mission moments, too? The rotating voices and fresh perspectives will help everyone keep their eyes on the ball.
3. **Highlight follow-ups**: Have you ever started planning for a future board meeting only to realize that no one followed up on an action step identified at the last board meeting? One way to highlight follow-ups (and raise the level of peer-to-peer accountability) is to be very clear in the meeting Minutes who made a commitment to do what before the next board meeting. In addition, a quick email, post-meeting, highlighting "next steps," and who's responsible, with a timetable, lowers the risk that board members will be offering an apology at the next meeting for not following through. New board members need a special kind of "follow-up." Make sure someone (board chair? Chair of the board development committee?) checks-in with new board members after their first meeting to ask them how it went and demystify anything they didn't understand.
4. **Culture eats strategy**: You are trying to encourage the board's discussions to be at a strategic level, but they're not going there. Hmmm. What are the most important matters facing the nonprofit? A challenging fundraising environment? Changes in government grants? Increased need in the community? Whatever the issues, make sure *every meeting agenda* touches on those issues and that there are opportunities for board members to continuously learn about big picture influences on the nonprofit's mission. Involving the board in the most

significant challenges the organization faces should be part of the culture of every board meeting, not just at an annual “strategic planning retreat.” Share “human interest” stories or news clippings that highlight issues the nonprofit is working to address. Board members can stay updated throughout the year on trends that impact charitable nonprofits through newsletters from state associations of nonprofits and the National Council of Nonprofits. Make it easy for them to sign-up by forwarding the newsletters you receive to your board members.

5. **Watch the clock**: Using timed agendas is great in theory, but we all know that some discussions just demand more time than we planned for. What’s the best way to ensure space for those discussions while also respecting your board members’ time? When an agenda topic is going long, don’t be shy about pressing the pause button to check-in with everyone: Can they stay in the meeting longer? Are there so many unknowns that the issue needs to go back to a committee for further exploration? Can someone clarify the most significant questions that the board absolutely needs to answer before it adjourns? Can the issue(s) be broken down into manageable chunks, some of which can be postponed to another meeting? Honoring the clock will encourage feelings of trust and respect since board members will be confident that you won’t allow meetings to drag on past their allotted time.

However you spend this summer, we hope you will stay connected to your state association of nonprofits, and the National Council of Nonprofits, for information that will help your nonprofit have smooth sailing along its way!