



So you have a consent agenda... now how do you fill a board meeting?

By Laura B. Roberts, Principal, Roberts Consulting

Nonprofit governance gurus have long suggested that boards of directors simplify their meetings with the use of a “consent agenda” – a tool that may be familiar to regulars at town meetings. Basically, the chair or executive director puts all of the routine reports that require no real discussion into a single agenda item. One can also put routine items that need a vote, such as authorizing a new signatory to the bank account or accepting minutes from the last meeting. The reports and other documents for the consent agenda are prepared in advance and mailed to the board with sufficient time for members to read and review the information. This is critical! If the reports are not distributed in advance, the board will not have the information it needs to do its job responsibly.

The consent agenda is the first item on the agenda. The chair asks if any member would like to remove an item from the consent agenda and move it to the regular agenda for discussion. That step does not require a vote. The chair then asks for a motion, second and vote to approve all items in the consent agenda. The item removed for discussion is generally dealt with immediately unless there are reasons to delay until later in the meeting.

As an organization starts using consent agendas, too many items might be taken off the consent agenda because people are used to asking questions about routine matters. Also some board members resist relegating their reports to the consent agenda, savoring the 10 to 15 minutes they get to report on the details of their committee’s work. With some gentle guidance from the chair, members will learn to feel more comfortable.

This simple step prunes the work of the board considerably, leaving time for more deliberative, constructive conversation and board learning. Governance experts suggest that board engagement improves because the meetings are about substantive issues rather than routine business. However, some executive directors and chairs have found it difficult to fill the time! How might a board spend this newfound time?

1. Cut either the number of meetings or the length of meetings. If your board meets every month for two or more hours, it is likely that you are tiring them out and quite possibly hurting your recruitment efforts.
2. Select one or two questions per meeting that warrant in-depth discussion and reflection. To have a fruitful discussion, the board may need to be prepared with background information or other data. Ideally, this would be shared in advance, but you could also have a short (less than 15 minutes) introduction to the issues and questions. The question might be immediate and tactical (Do our fundraising events need an overhaul?) or long range and strategic (If we were to re-purpose the space occupied by the gift shop, what might we do with it?).
3. Use the time to learn more about the museum itself. Curatorial staff might be invited to give a tour of collections storage or highlight an upcoming exhibition. The education staff might give the board the opportunity to experience some of the activities that take place in the galleries or during tours. The marketing director could walk them through the museum's social media platforms. The more informed the board is about the inner workings of the museum, the better able they are to advocate for the museum.
4. Get smart about something else relevant to the museum. You might invite guests to present to the board: the city manager, leadership of other nonprofits, academics who are engaged in potentially relevant research, etc. The board will get more out of this if they are given just a little background reading to prepare them to think about the relevance of what they are learning.
5. Invite the director of another museum to help the board envision the future. This is a popular option, but be strategic. Select someone from an institution that is doing great work and represents your museum's next set of aspirations. Don't jump right to the largest and best-known museums! And while you are thinking about it, consider inviting the board chair as well.
6. Meet jointly with another board – either from another nonprofit in town or another museum. Sharing questions and issues with peers can put your work in perspective and also open up thinking about opportunities for collaboration.
7. Visit a museum. While you can learn a lot from meeting with a director or board, sometimes a change of scene is even better. Go visit a museum together, with a set of questions you will all think about. You can go as civilians, looking at the visitor experience, or as professional colleagues, going behind the scenes.
8. Go on a less predictable field trip. Is your museum grappling with branding? Try visiting a business like Whole Foods and look carefully at how that brand is sustained throughout the store. Rethinking community service? A top-notch public library might be a good place to benchmark.
9. Read and discuss something relevant to the board's work. For example, the NEA recently released a [study of trends in public participation](#) in the arts between 2002 and 2012. That could be the start of an excellent discussion of how the museum might be experiencing those trends and how it is responding. You might also find articles in professional publications that bear on the board's role as stewards and planners. The boards of historic houses, for example, should definitely read the story in

the Summer 2014 issue of *History News* about the National Trust’s decision to include historic structures and landscapes as part of its “museum collection” () and think about how their collections policies and ethics policies might change.

10. Keep the strategic plan front and center. The single best governance idea I have come across comes from Thomas McLaughlin who suggests organizing the board agenda around the goals of your strategic plan. Each goal area will likely require reporting from more than one committee, reinforcing the role of the board in ensuring that they are all focused on the work of the plan.

Every board I have been on and worked with that switches to a consent agenda and uses the time to engage the board’s minds and imaginations in exploration, learning, and discussion has seen attendance at board meetings improve. Members are more knowledgeable and feel that they are making a substantive contribution to the museum. The time they spend together is more enjoyable and often less structured, allowing for the bonding that research tells us is so important to high functioning boards that work in an environment of mutual respect and trust.

Comments

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