

Effective Board Meetings



To understand what an effective board meeting is, one must first define "effective". Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary defines "effective" as "producing or designed to produce a desired effect". Before a board of directors can operate effectively, they must garner an understanding of what is keeping them from their goal. Therefore, before we delve into how to conduct an effective board meeting, it might be helpful to understand some of the issues that make them ineffective. Eliminating these common problems will certainly lead to more productive and shorter meetings.

First, a board meeting is not a meeting of the members; their involvement is specifically limited. It is the board's job to help the membership understand this.

A board meeting is not a meeting of the High School Debate Club. I'm not referring to the required discourse a board must engage in to reach a decision, I'm referring to debate between board members and owners who choose to attend the meeting. While sometimes necessary between board members, this interaction with audience members must be avoided for a meeting to be effective.

Effective board meetings start with strong leadership from the president. That leadership must provide a clear understanding of the board's purpose, which is the successful operation of the organization. As the elected representatives of the association, the board is charged with oversight of the community's finances, infrastructure and condition of common and private properties - no small task in and of itself. Comparable to a City Council, the board must weigh and consider what is best for the entire community while trying to place self interests on the back burner, often without much help or participation from fellow owners. At least, that is until the board must make an unpopular decision.

Understanding the purpose and overcoming the first obstacle I mentioned becomes paramount. If the board allows too much homeowner involvement during the meeting, business cannot be completed. So how do we engage those present while still getting the work accomplished? This requires a firm but fair board president who decisively establishes the rules of engagement from the beginning and stands by them. Timed agendas and time limits for owner comments related to agenda-specific items are imperative.

Provide everyone who attends with a detailed agenda containing all the action items the board will be voting on at the meeting. Owner commentary should be limited to the agenda items and permitted only at the beginning or the end of the meeting with a time limit of three minutes. If an owner wishes to bring other items to the board's attention and those items will require action from the board, they should be acknowledged, noted and placed on the agenda for the next regular board meeting. They should be added to the current meetings agenda only if the board is certain adequate time to deal with them will be available. The board must also ensure that if the item is to be considered during the current session, enough information is available to fully discuss, deliberate and make an informed decision on the issue.

Establish time limits for board members. Three minutes per board member is sufficient in most cases. Provide opportunity for opposing comments and curtail discussion when the president feels that both sides have had adequate opportunity to present their side or the discussion becomes redundant. However, board

members may, during deliberations, ask specific owners questions to clarify a point if desired, but this should not be allowed to reopen discussion from the audience. Remember that the board was elected to make decisions on behalf of the members and those decisions should be in the best interest of the association. That requires listening and being well informed; it does not mean being badgered and bullied from the floor during a board meeting.

Another significant detractor to conducting an effective meeting is being drawn into a debate with an impassioned homeowner during the open forum or homeowner commentary portion of the meeting. This one is hard to avoid as board members are often as passionately in favor of or against the owner's position as the owner. Again, the president has primary responsibility to control this situation. Unfortunately, he or she may be the one who is engaged in the raging debate with the audience member or board member. It takes a significant amount of self control to avoid this pitfall, and it may fall to another member of the board to intervene and get things back on track.

While it is human nature to defend your position, it is obviously counterproductive to the conduct of a productive meeting. Controlling the emotional side of the equation often proves a formidable task, but one that must be undertaken none the less. Many boards find that judicious use of parliamentary procedure can be of help.

Last but certainly not least is preparation. How simple would it be if everyone was prepared to work when the meeting is called to order, and the agenda items checked off like clockwork? I think everyone has attended a board meeting where the directors arrive moments before the appointed hour, sit down and proceed to rip open the board packet the manager so diligently provided five to seven days ago. Everyone present has seen the massive agenda and knows full well that the five detailed requests for proposal are listed as action items. No doubt this is going to be a long meeting. Failure to familiarize oneself with the material to be discussed almost certainly leads to an ineffective meeting. It may sound simplistic, but reading and understanding the content of the board packet goes a long way to being effective. Prior preparation allows board members an opportunity to ask for clarification in advance of the meeting. This not only facilitates clearing agenda items, but it also allows the manager to provide any additional information the board might need to make its decision.

To fulfill their fiduciary obligations, board members must be effective. To reach that desired result, they are empowered to hire professionals such as accountants, attorneys, engineers, landscape contractors and management firms to provide them with detailed professional guidance and information. Consulting with these professionals provides the board with both expert guidance and a level of protection under the law that will help them to be more effective.

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