

Is Your Nonprofit Board Bored? Eight Ways to Keep Them Awake

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Are your nonprofit board members nodding off at your board meetings? Or maybe not even showing up?

They may be afflicted with nonprofit boardroom ennui resulting from not having anything of substance to think about or do.

Robert Herman and Associates, authors of *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*, found no correlation in their research between board effectiveness to factors such as board size, committee structure, or the number and duration of board meetings.

However, the way board meetings function does have a dramatic effect on a board member's engagement. If you mount mind-numbing show-and-tell meetings with predetermined outcomes, it is no wonder that your board members are asleep at the wheel or missing in action.

Perk up those meetings and make board members feel that they are actually doing something by:

1. Bundling routine items into a consent agenda for issues that need board approval but not board discussion so they can be dispensed with quickly and easily.
2. Designing a session within a board meeting that encourages dialog about an issue, not decision making. Make the issue something of substance and include a summary of the discussion with the next board minutes.
3. Breaking the board into small groups for a discussion. Design the groups carefully so that shy board members are not with overbearing members. This will encourage speaking up and creativity.
4. Using an outside facilitator for discussion of issues. This will free the board chair and the CEO so they cannot so easily nudge the discussion in any one direction. The facilitator should be adept at using methods such as brainstorming.
5. Setting up periodic retreats away from the usual meeting site. When working with the Girl Scouts in St. Louis, we took the board members to one of our camps for an overnight. There's nothing quite like sitting around a bonfire to loosen things up.
6. Framing the context of an issue by explaining a possible strategy, or identifying the questions the board should address.
7. Making sure that your board chair is genuine about inviting board members to raise concerns, voice criticisms, and express their ideas even when they challenge the status quo.
8. Providing information ahead of time that will help board members think about issues that will be discussed at the meeting. For instance, assign an article to read and ask that each board member be ready to briefly report three things that they learned from it. Make sure you follow up at the meeting.

Engaged nonprofit board members are happy board members. Create an environment that is encouraging to that engagement and invite your board members to think about strategy, not just administrative trivia.