**Nonprofit Board Meetings & Agendas**

Rex Mitchell, 1/15/19

What’s the difference between an unproductive nonprofit board meeting and an effective nonprofit board meeting? The board meeting agenda and the board chair who uses it well. A good nonprofit board meeting agenda performs half of the work of having an effective meeting, and the board chair uses it to make the rest of the work happen.

***Board meetings should focus on decisions and action items, with much less on reports and general discussions. The agenda and minutes should reflect this.***

Here are some things that can help make the agenda and meeting of a nonprofit board meeting focused and effective:

1. Every board meeting should have a clear agenda that is sent out to the members beforehand and also reminds them to follow up on any action items from the previous meeting.

2. Agenda items identified by board members, executive director, directors, and others should be communicated to the board chair in advance, so they can be included in the agenda. (This can eliminate the need to hear reports early in the meeting in order to become aware of new action items reflected in the reports.)

3. Most of the information in reports and updates can be sent to the board members together with the agenda or as part of regular email updates to the board. ***It is vital that all read these and come to the meeting prepared.*** The bulk of operational discussions can take place in committees or other work outside board meetings.

4. The order of items in the agenda and time available should reflect the importance and priority of each item. The most important items should be earlier in the meeting to ensure adequate time to deal with them. The board chair should think through the agenda items in advance to determine if it is feasible to get through all of the items during the meeting - then decide if there are items that may require a time limit.

5. An important requirement for effective decision making is to identify creative, viable options. These must be real alternatives – not just minor variations on a single theme.

6. It is important to make decisions “stick” by making them concrete and specific. The Secretary (or someone else designated) should record and send out a list of decisions and action items shortly after the meeting, either as minutes or separately.

7. Reviewing operating performance and making strategy decisions are distinct activities, requiring different modes of discussion and different mind-sets. The most successful organizations hold separate meetings for in-depth strategic management work (as NAMI-SFV is doing). However, monitoring action items and progress is part of regular board meetings. Part of a regular board meeting may be devoted to addressing a current critical issue that the organization is facing.

8. The agenda should include the mission of the organization to keep board members mindful of their purpose.

9. Having ongoing board member development is important to help the board improve its performance. Also helpful is “processing” the meeting at the end (i.e., what about the way we worked was good/helpful and we should remember to do it again, & what will improve the way we worked for next time?)

10. It is important to start and stop the board meetings on time.

11. It helps to arrange opportunities for board members and staff to have social interactions.

12. Having effective, efficient meetings requires discipline, including: (a) do work that doesn’t need to take place in board meetings outside the meetings, (b) do most of reporting in writing, (c) read things sent in advance in order to come to meetings prepared, and (d) stay focused on the important items. It is not necessary that everyone comment on every item.