



6. CONDUCTING BETTER BOARD MEETINGS

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Meetings: Gain or Pain?

Who leads the Meeting?

The Chair as Leader

Choosing a chairperson is an important decision. The chair must be well known and respected. He/she must earn the respect and trust of the congregation and other Board members. Some Boards tend to elevate the person with the most seniority or prestige to the chair position. Being an effective chair has little to do with either. Above all, the chair is expected to facilitate a group process which draws the best from individual members and the collective group.

The chair and the senior pastor stand at the most critical nexus of the church. Chair is responsible for how the Board functions, while the Senior Pastor is responsible for effective implementation and administration. How they perform individually, as well as the quality of their interaction, sets the tone for the entire church.

Four Major Functions of a Board Chairperson:

1. Distributes Pertinent Information

The chair is responsible to ensure the Board has the information it needs to fulfill its role. The old computer adage applies – *garbage in, garbage out*. Pastoral staff and Board committees are expected to assemble quality reports by the agreed upon schedule. Conversely, staff or committee members have a right to expect their report will be read thoughtfully and without fail.

For most Boards the problem is not quantity of information but quality or the right kind of information. Information should be well organized, concise and available in sufficient time to be read in advance.

2. Supportive Relationship with Senior Pastor

The senior pastor is expected to support staff, but who supports and maintains a supportive relationship with the senior pastor? The answer is the chair. It is one of his/her most important non-meeting responsibilities. The two should meet regularly, at least once between meetings of the Board, to talk about issues facing the church. They should plan together and dream together. Meeting together informally, like at a sporting event, may serve an important purpose of deepening their relationship.

It would be highly unusual if these two strong individuals did not disagree occasionally. They can and should. But the disagreement must be at the objective level. It cannot be allowed to disintegrate and become personal or acrimonious. Should this happen, the Board must step in and resolve the problem. Protracted conflict can be very detrimental to everyone involved and must not be tolerated.

Quite apart from their personal compatibility or chemistry, the chair and the senior pastor must have respect for the office of the other. An effective chair does not usurp the authority which is invested in the office of senior pastor and does not denigrate it in any way. The effective senior pastor humbly and joyfully submits himself to the Board to

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which he is accountable through the chair. There is no tug of war and no playing of games. The atmosphere is one of mutual respect and collaboration.

The selection of a chair within the Alliance further emphasizes the importance of a good relationship between Board chairperson and senior pastor. The constitution reads: "*The senior pastor or a member of the Board appointed by him shall be the chair.*" (Article VIII, C&MA Local Church Constitution).

3. Prepare the Agenda

Since the chair is responsible for how the Board functions, the chair is responsible for the agenda. The agenda is a plan for how the Board spends its meeting time. It should be drawn two weeks before the meeting by the chair in consultation with the senior pastor and distributed to all who are expected to participate, along with necessary background information.

4. Conduct Meetings

Chairing is more than ceremony and formality. The criteria for a successful meeting is more than starting and adjourning meetings on time and in accordance with Robert's Rules of Order. The crucial questions are, Were good decisions made? Was the mission furthered?

Anyone who accepts the responsibility of the chair surrenders some private prerogatives. One of these is to enter into vigorous debate on all the issues. A chair who is not able to restrain himself/herself in this way adds frustration to the process which he/she is expected to facilitate. Because of these limitations, some Board members believe they can have more influence on the outcome of a meeting if they hold positions other than the chair.

The chair is expected to allocate the available meeting time so as to cover the entire agenda. This is not always easy in a context where freedom of speech prevails. It happens (not infrequently!) that Boards strain at a gnat (often at the top of the agenda) and end up swallowing camels (often late in the meeting).

"If anyone would be first, he must be last and servant of all."

Work from an Annual Board Agenda

Purpose annually to identify 2 – 3 major priorities you would like your Board to have accomplished by the end of the year. This intentionality will serve to combat the natural tendency toward a pre-occupation with the urgent. For example, these priorities can be identified at a fall Board retreat and then inserted for discussion and action in an annual Board agenda. Unless, a Board proactively ensures their agreed annual priorities are placed in an annual calendar, the important things are squeezed out by the tyranny of the urgent.

Priorities will help move you from motive to action. Priorities are the general areas in which your effort is directed. They are developed out of your assessments addressing weak areas in your church or ministry. A key question to determine priority is: "What 2-3 areas will we continue to direct our energies or focus on in the coming year?" Priorities are ongoing, non-measurable, and non-dated groupings of activities or responsibilities.

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Conduct Effective and Productive Meetings

"... for your meetings do more harm than good." (1 Corinthians 11:17)

When two or three people meet informally, they are likely to be rational, engaging, even charming. They enjoy each other's company as they freely exchange ideas on topic of mutual interest. Put those same two or three people into a meeting with four or six others like them, and something changes. Some become shy. They clam up and hardly speak. Others get loud and domineering.

Boards are composed of different people. Some are right brain operators, while others are decidedly left brain. Some are cautious and examine every detail, while other enjoy talking about the big picture and thrill of risk and adventure. The best Boards are not composed of members who think alike. They are heterogeneous, but with a common commitment to the purpose of the church and a mutual respect for one another.

Board meetings are a necessary part of organizational life. That is where a Board does its work. A Board functions as a Board only when it is in session. It follows, therefore, that to be effective; a Board must have efficient and productive meetings.

Strategy #1 - Prayer

Agree – Disagree... Spending *More* time in prayer equals *More* time on the agenda?

- Prayer centers us
- Prayer protects us (Exercising spiritual warfare)
- Prayer builds team trust (More vulnerable in times of prayer than at any other time).

Strategy # 2 - Consent Agenda

- An "agenda within an agenda"
- Includes routine things that don't need a lot of discussion
 - Minutes
 - Routine financial reports
 - Staff narrative reports
 - Dashboard indicators

Anyone can request an item be removed from Consent Agenda and placed on regular agenda

All adopted with one motion at the beginning of the meeting

When Boards are left to do what comes naturally, they typically spend more than 50% of their time on housekeeping items. They use valued time to react to business that seems urgent, whether it has been properly processed or not, whether it is important or not, leaving little or no time for good planning. Boards get into bad habits and typically repeat this cycle meeting after meeting, year after year. A consent agenda can substantially cut the time given to routine issues that don't require monthly discussion.

Strategy #3 - Decision Profile

- Decision required
- Why it's on the Board agenda
- Background information
- Alternatives considered (if any) and response
- Recommendation
- Who prepared it

Requires staff or committees to do their homework and not use up valuable Board time exploring an issue.

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Strategy #4 – Discussion Briefing

- Useful when Board input is needed prior to staff or Board committees doing their work.
- Effectiveness depends on how well-developed the questions are to stimulate advance thinking

Strategy #5 – Effective Board Committees

- Board Committees help the Board to do ITS work. Board committees study specific issues as assigned to them by the Board (not Lead Pastor). They identify options, and draw up recommendations for Board action. They do pre-board, not sub-board work. They save Board time by doing background research, thinking, strategizing so concrete proposals or questions can be put to the Board.
- The only authority a committee has is that which is assigned to it by the Board.

- Board Committees should NOT be set up to monitor or supervise staff functions.

Strategy #6 – Cultivate an Evaluative Mindset

1. On a scale of 1-5, "*The issues covered tonight were trivial/essential.*"
2. On a scale of 1-5, "*Tonight's discussion was concerned primarily with implementation or strategy.*"
3. "*What might we do differently to improve on our meeting tonight?*"
4. "*In light of tonight's meeting, what are the most important topics we should address at our next meeting?*"
5. "*What was the most valuable contribution we made to the church's welfare tonight?*"

Pass out a 3X5 card at the end of the Board meeting. Ask Board members to respond to the five questions above. If done regularly, it begins to build a constructive critical attitude toward what is being done each Board meeting.

Strategy #7 –Sample Monthly Board Meeting Agenda

1. Devotional Time – Environment of "worshipful work."
2. Approve agenda – remove items from Consent Agenda
3. Decisions required at this meeting – extracted from all areas of ministry.
4. Non-urgent decision/discussion items – prioritized
5. Information Items – no discussion
6. Mini-evaluation of meeting

Added Note: Circulate agenda materials well in advance to provide time for meaningful preparation before the Board meeting.