



7. CONSENT AGENDAS – WHAT ARE THEY FOR?

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Many boards have realized that time is a scarce commodity and to benefit fully from their busy board members, they must use every minute of the meeting strategically and purposefully. This is where the consent agenda can help.

A consent agenda appears as one section or one subject in the meeting agenda. Usually it is placed at the very beginning of the agenda to let the board subsequently continue on with other issues that need special attention.

Consent agendas allow the board to group standard, regular, and routine items under one heading and pass that “package” with one vote. The important feature of these items is that none of them should require any discussion. When the chair brings the consent agenda to a vote, if one board member has a question concerning an item included in the consent agenda, that item gets pulled out and handled separately. This last issue can be a challenge for boards that are not comfortable and totally familiar with the process. But with practice, education, and patience, a board will soon learn to appreciate this feature and the impact it has on the way meetings are run.

A standard consent agenda could include

- Committee and chief executive reports,¹
- Approval of the minutes from the last meeting
- Any routine documents that simply need to get recorded in the minutes, and
- Other items that have previously gone through thorough deliberation and simply need the final seal of approval of the board

The board needs to be familiar and comfortable with each item it votes on in the consent agenda. This level of familiarity is possible to achieve when the documents and reports have been distributed to every board member well in advance of the meeting as part of the overall board packet. The time for the board to ask questions about items on the consent agenda is in the days and weeks before the meeting. By using e-mail or a phone call to clarify a point or suggest a correction in the minutes, the person responsible for the agenda should then make the necessary changes and share the corrected version with all board members before the meeting. The board meeting is not the ideal place to handle these operational issues.

By using consent agendas, a board can save critical time for discussion of issues that need attention. Removing committee reports from the main agenda may first make committee chairs feel as if their work is not appreciated. Including the report in the consent agenda does not mean a committee’s work on a crucial issue should be ignored and tabled. On the contrary, a committee’s recommendation or analysis may be the focal point of the board’s next discussion. Once the committee’s report has been recorded, the board can move forward on the issue. At the same time, it is not uncommon for the next meeting to come and go without something extremely serious or important being included in a committee report. It makes sense to read that report in a more comfortable setting prior to a short board meeting rather than have it take up precious meeting time.

Another advantage of the consent agenda is the elimination of inactive participation. Meetings can become boring when members are required to sit still and listen to reports. Committee reports rarely

make the boardroom burst into laughter because of their special humor or captivating case studies. Board members need to be stimulated and that stimulation comes from participation in an engaging debate or discussion.

Outi Flynn, *Meet Smarter – A Guide to Better Nonprofit Board Meetings*, Board Source (2004, pp 17-18)