



BOARD MEETING PREPARATION

10 Tips for Chief Executives and Board Chairs

Leading with Intent: 2017 National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices found that chief executives and board chairs agree that there is a relationship between board meeting preparation and board culture. Those who report that their board members are prepared for meetings also report positive board culture. However, more than a quarter (26 percent) of executives and nearly a fifth (18 percent) of board chairs report that their board members are unprepared for board meetings.

This statistic is troubling, but it does not tell the whole story. *Leading with Intent* cross-analyzed responses to (1) questions about the board's work and culture and (2) questions related to organizational performance. Board chairs' responses — unlike chief executives' — pointed to board members receiving necessary information in advance of board meetings as one of the factors with the strongest relationship to board impact on organizational performance. However, board chairs were less likely than chief executives to state that board members received the information necessary to adequately prepare for board meetings.

Given this information, it is important to question whether there is a disconnect between chief executives and board members when it comes to board meeting preparation. While board members are responsible for reading the materials sent to them prior to a meeting, they cannot do so if they never receive them or receive them at the last minute.

Below are ten tips for chief executives and board chairs to improve the board meeting materials they share with the board prior to meetings, setting everyone up for success. They are based on the understanding that board meetings should be devoted to strategy and policy. Unfortunately, only 34 percent of board chairs and 25 percent of chief executives report in *Leading with Intent* that their board meetings focus on strategy and policy.

Boards that spend too much time on operational issues are not fulfilling one of their most essential governance responsibilities — serving as a strategic asset to the chief executive and source of leadership for the organization. Exceptional boards provide oversight, consistently asking questions and honing the organization's direction against its mission and priorities.

Strategic board meetings place more importance on the chief executive and board chair providing helpful materials in advance. Board meetings that encourage analysis and debate require different materials than meetings with a purely operational focus.

- 1. Plan ahead! Don't procrastinate!** Board members should receive pre-meeting materials no later than one week before the meeting. The chief executive and board chair should work together to determine the focus of the meeting and the agenda far enough in advance to ensure that they have enough time to gather the relevant materials and the board has enough time to review them. Some boards and chief executives develop annual meeting calendars outlining the focus of each meeting.
- 2. Always include an agenda along with supporting materials.** Use the agenda to clarify meeting priorities and which issues the board will spend the bulk of the meeting discussing and/or that require a vote.
- 3. Ensure strategic goals are reflected in the agenda.** A large part of the board's role in strategic planning is monitoring the organization's performance and ensuring new initiatives are connected to previously defined priorities.
- 4. If you have not already done so, adopt a consent agenda** (a compilation of items that the board approves with one vote) to save time for strategic discussions.
- 5. When gathering materials for board members, always consider how well the materials reflect the meeting's focus.** Don't force board members to slog through overly complex and unnecessary materials. Instead, provide them with supporting documentation that can inform discussions and provide different perspectives on important issues. This can include articles on controversial governance-related topics, new research, or timely issues that relate to the meeting's focus. Providing board members with unrelated information takes attention away from the meeting's most important issues.
- 6. Include a table of contents and a cover memo informing the board members of the meeting's purpose and outlining what is expected of them.** This will help guide their review of the materials.
- 7. Include the minutes from the previous meeting** so they can be reviewed prior to the meeting and approved quickly.
- 8. Consider including generative questions** you would like the board to come prepared to discuss or asking them to come to the meeting with generative questions of their own related to the focus of the meeting.
- 9. Prepare and distribute dashboards** to provide board members with a visual representation of the organization's finances and/or program performance. Dashboards can help boards efficiently address their oversight responsibilities while saving the bulk of meeting time for discussion.
- 10. Include executive summaries for staff and committee reports** and presentations.