

Mission Centered Board Leadership
“How to be an Effective Participant in Board Meetings”

Mark R. Fisher

To a large extent, good governance focuses on preparing for, attending, and participating in board and committee meetings. It is at these meetings where key policy is often formalized and the board members involvement becomes critical. Without the member’s active participation at this level of the organization, the mission begins to become compromised. There is probably no more important role at the board level than that of the governance function.

On Being Prepared

The board member should receive the agenda and all related materials for study one week prior to the meeting. By receiving materials early it is possible to have ample time to review the information that will be discussed. In addition, it is reasonable to expect a call from staff two or three days prior to the meeting reconfirming attendance. This call underscores the importance of the individual’s involvement and creates the opportunity for pre-meeting dialog with the agency.

Read the material early.

It will be important to schedule an appropriate amount of time (at least four days before the meeting) for review the information that has been provided. Without at least these four days’ breathing room, it will be difficult to fully reflect on the material at hand. I need time to ruminate on key issues. Often, it is time that creates clarity and minimizes the probability of “shooting from the hip” decision- making or poor dialog that comes from a lack of preparation. I have participated in meetings that have been dominated by outspoken people who did not do their homework. Sometimes I was the culprit.

Develop a plan.

When reviewing what the organization has provided, it is important to jot down comments, questions, and concerns about specific issues on the agenda. By writing down comments, it is possible to begin to internalize the information. This will help establish a plan for participation at the meeting.

During the process of preparation board members may need to gain further clarification on a specific issue from the CEO. Effective members rarely hesitate to give a call by asking questions to gain the information and insight needed prior to the meeting.

Critic or Cheerleader?

In the preparation phase, it is important to identify questions and concerns. Additionally, I have found that it is useful to understand what I am excited about within the agency. There should be a lot of good work taking place. It is important to not only make a note of these developments, but to also celebrate the positive with those around me.

Without this sense of joy about the organization it will be difficult to share its story with others. Further, I have found that a lack of joy might be a function of pride. This takes place when the board member feels that it is his/her function only to teach and judge rather than to learn and grow.

Within the board room it is important to always find ways to celebrate the talents, expertise, and experiences in the organization and with each other. Through celebration, it becomes possible to more fully understand that everyone in the organization has an important role to play. By being a cheerleader people begin breaking down walls that can be established by the fear of sharing. By being a cheerleader the board member helps set the stage for stronger discussions that lead to better decisions. By being a cheerleader it is possible to help bring out the best in everyone.

Attending Board Meetings

As important as preparation is, it can do little good if members don't attend meetings. Even if I have prepared and am ready to send the equivalent of a proxy, my position is marginalized due to lack of attendance. It is the dialog between members that plays an important, creative role in the establishment of policy. During the meeting it is possible that I will hear an insight from another board member that could have an impact on my thinking about a specific issue.

The board/committee meeting creates a venue for expertise and commitment to come together and form a context for powerful mission-centered thinking. Without attendance preceded by solid preparation, it becomes difficult to fulfill the governance function.

About Teleconferences

With larger organizations that have a more significant national focus, it is often difficult to get everyone physically in the same room. While we can achieve good communication via technology, but there is nothing like being there. Every effort should be made to create board meetings where everyone is in attendance.

Setting Schedules

In order to improve the probability of attendance members should expect the schedule of full board meetings and standing committee meetings one year in advance. The schedule should be very specific with respect to date, time, and location. Further, it should be clear that the organization respects the board members time. Each meeting should have a clearly defined start and stop time to allow people to schedule other commitments as necessary.

I have found that it is best to schedule an additional half-hour in case the meeting runs long. If it does not, I have been given a little more time to prepare for the next activity. Most people probably need to slow down a little anyway. Finally, I know that the best way to guarantee my attendance is to commit the meetings to my calendar for a year in advance. In doing so, I have been able to minimize conflicts.

Establishing Priorities

The key here is to make the board and committee meetings a top priority. By plugging the information into my planner I have made a commitment. In short, effective

board members try doing everything possible to attend each board meeting. If a member finds that she/he is regularly bumping the board meeting for other activities; it may be a sign of drifting commitment.

About Self Study

Board members are usually given a lot of information. The key to effective leadership in making time to process the material provided. Beyond studying the information for meetings, many take time to meet with the CEO to learn how they might broaden their knowledge about the people and issues that the organization attempts to address. They often become students and even experts of the cause.

Participating in Board Meetings

The fully prepared board member is ready to participate. He/she has studied the materials, written down comments and is positioned to be a cheerleader and at times a critic. They can go into the meeting with the confidence that they are gifted, called to serve, and prepared. Further, participants are guided by the knowledge that their fellow board members also have expertise and insights to help feed an understanding about the organization and its mission. Effective members are prepared to learn and share.

Do not Force Participation

It is important that as a board member I come ready to speak as well as listen. In reality, depending on how large the board is, I will be spending most of my time listening to what others have to say. Members need to stay focused on the conversation and not drift. This is sometimes very difficult but the best way to prevent drift is to come prepared. Drink a cup of Starbucks ahead of time for a little added insurance.

Jotting down notes and keeping track of how the conversation might be changing the board members position can be very important. If the dialogue around the table has had an effect, many have found that it is useful to share their original view with the group and explain how the conversation is changing this view.

The key within all of this is for the participant to share her/his understanding of truth and let the table respond as policy is being formed. Sometimes people tend to minimize their own insights, thinking it really doesn't matter. Insights shared sometimes take a little courage. I must trust myself and share. Finally, I have found that it is best not be afraid of a little silence. The group doesn't have to always be talking. It is often useful to have a little time for silent reflection during the board meeting.

Do not Monopolize Time

At best members should never talk more than 5-10% of the time. This means that they will be listening most of the time. It is important for everyone to work at allowing the voices of the board to blend. While some members are more comfortable communicating in a group setting others are more nervous. Those who are talkative by nature need to encourage others to speak out and share their thoughts. Balanced communication does create more effective policy and offers real momentum for moving forward.

There have been many times too numerous to mention when I have heard from formerly silent board members who regretted not speaking up in the aftermath of poorly

developed policies. Board members cannot be Monday morning quarterbacks. Rather, they must always be prepared to lead by sharing their insight at the table. All of these points need to be considered by the board chairman in managing the flow of the meeting.

Reflections on Governance

Do you agree with the principles discussed above? I recognize that much of what has been discussed is basic or could even be accused of being elementary. However, I have found that these dimensions of governance are almost assumed and are at times not executed in the non-profit context. The bottom line in all of this is that every board member needs to be fully prepared, in attendance, and ready to participate in board/committee meetings so that the governance function can be fulfilled. Where do you fall short? How can you improve?

Key Points to Remember

- 1) Do you receive materials for the board meeting one week in advance?
- 2) Do you review all of the materials at least four days before the meeting?
- 3) Are you prepared to ask questions and make observations about the materials presented?
- 4) Have you scheduled all board meetings into your calendar one year in advance?

About Mark R. Fisher

Mark is dedicated to helping a variety of organizations answer the question, “How do we build a community of compassion?”

The focus of his practice has come from a lifelong experience of working with volunteers, donors and staff. He began to realize that the similarities between each of the participants of an organization were more significant than the differences. “By building unity between volunteers, donors, staff and care receivers our ability to achieve full potential increases.”

His counsel has helped raised nearly \$750,000,000 in private support and generated thousands of stories in the media. Mark earned his doctorate from the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, Michigan with a dissertation entitled, “Compassion in Board Decision Making.” He has been a guest speaker and presenter at numerous conferences and has served on a variety of non-profit boards. He is the author of *Mission Centered Board Leadership* which can be purchased on his web-site, www.markrfisher.com.

To learn more about how Mark R. Fisher can assist your organization you can reach him at (248) 207-1312 or at bellfisher@aol.com.