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Running focused board meetings

Good meetings do not just happen; they take preparation and planning. As they say in the military, time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted.

What should a board spend its time doing? Best practice suggests more time should be devoted to strategy and the risks associated with achieving it than to holding to account and assurance. While this does not often happen in the public sector the gold standard that boards should aim for is 60% of time on strategy, 20% on assurance and 20% on holding to account.

Good preparation will set the tone. The chairman and secretary should be hand in glove with the chief executive in ensuring that the agenda is relevant and balanced, picking up items from earlier sessions and making sure the meeting moves the business forward.

Making decisions is the best use of a board. Devoting time to this is better use of an expensive resource than nodding through items to note. Constructing the agenda so that meaty, important items have enough time and are at a stage in the meeting when energy levels are good – at the beginning or after a break – and indicating how much time you expect to devote to each item is a useful, good practice.

Putting a physical line in the middle of the agenda with items for note below it is a visual nudge to participants. All matters should be accompanied by a paper that sets out what the board is being asked to do and describes how the paper arrived at the board. This should include those papers to note that have, in the public sector, to be owned by the board. If there are no lessons to be learned or concerns to be addressed then there is no need to spend time discussing them.

Papers work

Delivering crisp, well-argued board papers sent to members on time will allow the board to concentrate on the issues raised. A good question for a chairman to ask a presenter is “What do you want to draw our attention to?” This should dissuade them from repeating what is in the paper.

Assuming the board receives good papers, it is reasonable for the executive to expect them to have been read and understood – or that members have asked in advance or will ask at the meeting for clarification. The discussion that follows forms the most important part of the meeting and relies on the skills of the board to gather what they need to be able to make the decision asked of them.



Good chairmanship

The final and probably most important element of running a well-focused board meeting is the chairman and their chairmanship. Two hundred words will barely scratch the surface...

Most importantly, the chairman is in charge – it is their meeting and it is up to them to make sure that, within the terms of reference they are working to, the meeting meets their expectations and requirements. For this reason, the heavy lifting is often undertaken outside the meeting itself. The chair's role at the meeting is multi-faceted and one of the skills is knowing when to use each one.

The key attribute is facilitation: making sure that all board members are involved, and their questions and comments are dealt with by the executive. A good facilitator listens more than they speak, and it is good practice for the chairman not to be the first to comment on a paper or a presentation as this risks colouring the rest of the discussion.

What the board should expect is a chairman who helps guide and steer the conversation, makes sure that matters are clarified especially if he thinks that the question has not be adequately answered, makes sure the discussion is balanced by prompting members to contribute, particularly where the chairman knows a member holds a counter view. Finally, the most important attributes of reflecting the conversation back to the owner of the item and summarising the discussion so it leads to a decision or conclusion.

Summarising is an art well worth acquiring. A good summary acknowledges all contributions whilst leading to the consensus view. Acknowledging disagreement or even dissent is important if a collective decision is to be made and stuck to. This is much more likely if all participants feel their contribution has had value in helping the board to reach a decision. And that is what boards exist to do.

Illuminations

- A strong chairman with well-honed chairing skills is the key to a focused and productive board meeting. Exhibiting leadership requires ownership of the meeting; the chairman is in charge.
- A good general always relies on a good consigliere; a thinking, effective secretary is worth their weight in gold.
- Boards should spend their time on matters where they can add value and occupy themselves with more strategy than operation holding to account and assurance though these have their place.
- All the tools of the trade are essential: well-planned agendas, well-written papers and well-phrased questions.

If you have any questions or comments about this briefing, please call us on 07732 681120 or email advice@good-governance.org.uk.