

SECTION 25

EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

TOPICS

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M uch of the work of governing bodies is conducted in meetings. This section describes the characteristics of good meetings and how to ensure that they are well planned and managed.

THE CHALLENGE

You and the governing body chairperson want to improve your governance work by improving the effectiveness and efficiency with which you plan and conduct its meetings and those of its various committees and task forces. How can you organize and run better meetings? What are the characteristics of excellent meetings? And what infrastructure is needed to support such smart meetings?

PARTICIPANTS

Most governing body meetings are attended by only governing body members, a few senior managers, and possibly some health worker representatives. This is because too large a group makes it difficult to have good conversations and thinking. (See [Section 2](#), Composition and Competencies.) It is often a good idea, however, to periodically invite additional resource people to provide information and perspective to your decision-making process. It also gives them the opportunity to see the work of the governing body,

which fosters their support and ability to help implement its plans and decisions. Guests whom you might find valuable are:

- beneficiaries with good or bad stories about their experiences;
- health workers who can introduce new interventions or technologies or provide information about trends or issues likely to face your program in the coming months;
- a politician or media representative interested in supporting your programs and services;
- a governing body member from another similar organization in your region or country;
- an international donor, philanthropist, or funder of your services.

THE MEETING AGENDA

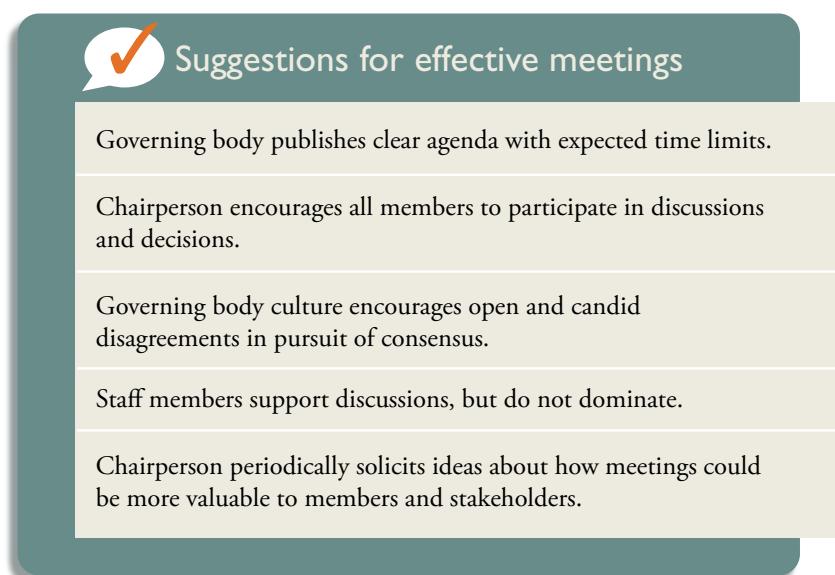
The meeting agenda provides an essential roadmap for good meetings. The governing body chairperson and managing director or CEO should develop and circulate the agenda well in advance of the meeting. Every community and culture has different views about and desires for group meetings and discussion. However, it is common to structure health services governing body meetings as described below to efficiently and methodically cover its business.

1. Welcome and introduction of any guests or new members: 5 minutes
2. Review of minutes from last meeting: 5 minutes
3. Brief reports on sub-groups: 5-10 minutes each, but with one designated to receive more time than others based on a calendar (see [Section 26, Themed Meetings Calendars](#)):
 - Finance
 - Quality
 - Community relations and advocacy
 - Resource mobilization
 - Staff relations
 - Continuous governance enhancement
4. Identification of any items that need action taken at this meeting
5. Discussion around the action items of the agenda: 60 minutes
6. Educational dimensions of the meeting that can inform action in future meetings: 15 minutes
7. Other business: 5 minutes
8. Closing comments and agreement on priority topics for the next meeting: 10 minutes
9. Adjourn

WAYS TO MAKE MEETINGS PURPOSEFUL AND PRODUCTIVE

Good meetings must be well planned in advance and focus on ideas and initiatives that help accomplish the mission and plans of the organization. See Figure 25.1. Poor meetings discourage member and staff participation and fail to take advantage of the unique experiences, ideas, and insights that governing body members can bring to your health services organization. They also waste staff time and can erode trust among members, health workers, beneficiaries, and potential funders.

FIGURE 25.1 Suggestions for effective meetings. Since the work of the governing body happens in its meetings, they should be conducted efficiently and effectively.



Don't Meet Too Often or for Too Long

While meetings are critical to governance decision-making, many governing bodies meet too often and do not use their time wisely. High-performance governing bodies meet from five to seven times yearly for about two to three hours. If your meetings routinely last for four to five hours, you risk exhausting the enthusiasm of members, and increasing the chances that unproductive arguments will erupt when people grow weary. This is especially the case if you are trying to meet more often than 10 times per year. More frequent meetings may be needed if there is a health crisis being addressed by the organization, or if it is facing severe political or financial challenges.

In low-resourced settings, there may also be pressure to meet more often because there is a stipend paid for each meeting. Some governing body leaders may want to have more meetings because they can demonstrate their importance or influence in the community.

It is also important to recognize that reduced meeting frequency and time guidelines work only if those in the governing body trust one another as well as the reports and progress being made by the health workers and the managers of your organization. The greater the trust, the less time needed to process analyses, reports, and action items. Low levels of trust prompt questions and requests for more information and make those in the governing body less willing to endorse proposed actions recommended by staff or committees.

In rural districts or provinces where members have to travel long distances to participate in meetings, you may need to plan more time to justify their travel. For example, you can add time for opportunities to listen to beneficiaries, and for health workers to describe their work, challenges, and aspirations. But the parts of the meeting needed for discussion and action about governing priorities can still be limited two to three hours.

If you are required by law or regulation to meet more frequently—e.g., monthly—explore how you can redefine the focus of certain meetings. For example, one meeting can be dedicated to conversations with the beneficiaries about their experiences with your organization, and another meeting could be devoted to an educational workshop by one of your health workers or an outside guest on trends in the disease or technology most relevant to your organization’s mission. Dedicate more time to a strategic planning retreat in which you address these types of topics:

- our service and financial performance in the past year;
- trends in the key drivers for the use of our services;
- the needs of the people we exist to serve;
- obstacles to our success and how we can remove them;
- actions that we must accomplish and investments that we must make to move us closer to achieving our mission.

Pick and Merchant observe that “Like all people, board members are creatures of habit, and board meetings, agendas, timetables, and processes typically follow regularized patterns. Having these regular routines reduces anxiety and stress. Personal calendars are easier to organize, and with a regular routine, things happen as they are expected to happen. If they are well designed, board routines also allow the board to operate efficiently. But routines also have their dark side. The exact characteristic that allows routines to reduce board member anxiety—predictability—is the feature that causes routines to discourage awareness of and responses to new environmental cues. Boards might be following their normal routine and miss some new issues that should be discussed. A possible solution to this tension is to change the calendars, processes, and routines periodically to unfreeze the board members’ thinking processes.”¹

To help enhance how you use your time in these meetings, discuss the observations in the following section about the style of your meetings with governing body leaders.

1. Katharina Pick and Kenneth Merchant, “Recognizing Negative Boardroom Group Dynamics,” in Jay W. Lorsch, ed., *The Future of Boards: Meeting the Governance Challenges of the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), p. 121.

Start with an agenda focused on governing for vision and mission. Experienced health sector leaders discuss the value of good meetings and how best to make them yield a productive exchange of ideas among community health stakeholders. It helps if you connect every activity and discussion to your main responsibility, which is to advance the vision and mission of your organization. Skip anything that doesn't keep you focused on your organizational purpose and your specific responsibilities in the governing body. Boards shouldn't get caught up in small details, nor should they micromanage. Their role is to guide and steer the organization to achieve its mission and plans.

Value (and facilitate) open space and big questions. Other than listening to reports, to focus on governance, board time is best spent by regularly setting aside time in meetings to ask questions that cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no.” What does our community’s future look like in our mission area? What trends are emerging that might affect demand for our programs and our capacity to provide those services? Where are the great ideas—from our field and elsewhere—that can help us think creatively and expansively about what lies ahead? What do we need, as a governing body, to lead into that future? It may be hard for action-oriented community leaders to recognize that it’s okay to give yourselves time to think and reflect over time—rather than to rush to a vote—on decisions shaping the organization’s future.

Avoid endless oral reports. Replace those verbal reports with written updates that contribute to members’ knowledge about the organization’s history, and instead open up meetings for more meaningful discussion and work. Doing so instantly creates time to discuss, learn, evaluate, and govern.

Flip the agenda. For some governing bodies, abandoning reports and throwing open the creative doors to the future simply asks too much. In those cases, you might consider flipping the agenda. This addresses the common complaint that members are so exhausted by listening to reports and dealing with the usual difficulties that dominate the first part of most agendas that they have no energy by the time they get to the more substantive topics that typically fall under “new business.” Listening to reports requires little concentration. If you absolutely must include oral reports, place them at the end and reserve prime time for what matters.

Create the expectation that every member will contribute—and maybe even lead—and provide opportunities for them to do so. No one should leave a board meeting without having contributed actively to the conversation. Some people process information in quiet ways. But everyone should be able to contribute to board discussions and deliberations. Make sure everyone has a chance to address topics in the agenda, and to share fully. Have board leadership and a board culture that expects that they do so.

Encourage storytelling. Sharing stories facilitates learning in ways that simply citing information and statistics cannot. Stories can connect us more closely and personally to the mission. They offer examples of how board, staff, and volunteers engaged to make a difference. They give us a chance to make sense of our own experiences and learn to share appropriately with donors and other stakeholders. Stories can create powerful opportunities to explore and understand our organizational role and impact in our community.

Make time for learning. Learning, which takes place in various forms during board meetings, builds group capacity to serve. Why not commit to offering regular opportunities to learn and explore? Ask individual members to share expertise that expands the group's knowledge or builds the skills needed to govern effectively. Share an article, story, video, or other resource before the meeting and devote 10 to 15 minutes to discussing how it applies to your mission or an issue you're facing as a board. Periodically ask a committee member to research a governance topic and share what is learned with the larger group.

Include updates on organizational and board plans. Strategic processes most often fail when they are confined to periodic exercises that result in a document that lingers until an update is needed. Help to ensure that strategic efforts—e.g., planning and goal-setting—have a chance to be useful; include time across the board year for updates. What's working well? What might have been more difficult than anticipated? What obstacles have arisen that were not anticipated? Regular check-ins allow governing body leaders to adjust and adapt appropriately to an ever-changing environment.

Acknowledge the big and little successes. The routine processes of governance are far from glamorous; the work can be tedious and occasionally hard. Keeping in mind a vision and mission that likely will not be reached in our lifetimes—and certainly not during our board terms—can test even the most passionate member's motivation. Take a moment to stop, as a group, and recognize members' contributions to advancing the mission. Acknowledge a job well done, creativity displayed, or outreach that engaged new stakeholders. Help the board and its members to appreciate those actions and efforts that make a difference, and reconnect them to their reason for serving.

Close every meeting with this important question: How did we advance our vision and mission today? Bring closure to your productive time together, and remind members why they are gathered. Do this by articulating how the work you did in this setting moved you—and your organization—just a little bit closer to what draws you together. Even if the steps are small, you should be able to identify ways in which your time moved the organization forward.

VENUES FOR MEETINGS

Meetings can be more interesting and productive if they occasionally occur in different settings. Criteria to guide the place in which the governing body does its work can include that it be:

- comfortable and safe;
- easily accessible, even for vulnerable and marginalized participants;
- easily accessible for managers and health workers to periodically meet with governing body members;

- amenable to providing refreshments for members, but not lavish receptions or meals that could alienate citizens, politicians, beneficiaries, and health workers;
- enabling for the use of decision support materials and technologies.

Effective governing bodies realize that once or twice a year, meetings can be scheduled in different venues to add interest and energy to the decision-making discussions. Alternative locations to consider for your meetings include:

- a school
- a hospital
- a different government building
- a health center or screening clinic
- a bus (to enable a mobile meeting in which you travel to various sites in your health system and conduct the meeting while you move between locations. In this instance, the people you visit may appreciate the opportunity to meet board members.)

MEETING MINUTES

Capturing and storing the conclusions of your meetings is a necessary evil of governing body work. Practical considerations in developing these minutes in a form that is usable and accessible for future decision-making are specified below:

- The notes on decisions made should be complete enough to allow reference in the future about what was decided and what information was relied upon for the decision.
- The summary must be understandable—with as many graphs and charts as feasible—so that an average person who was not in the meeting can follow the results and process.
- The summary should not be so exhaustive as to make it costly and cumbersome to prepare and store or read in the future.
- The minutes should be treated as confidential; they should be accessible only to board members and the chief executive.
- The minutes should be stored in a safe place away from harsh conditions, and if in digital form, on a server with good security.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Like all of your practices and processes, good governance is enhanced when you are always ready to continuously improve what you do and how you do it. Consider:

- helping the chairperson learn how to conduct a meeting that starts and ends on time, and that promotes wise discussions and debate. All members should feel their voices were heard and that no one faction dominated the conversation and decisions;
- making information needed for decision-making available far enough in advance to be digested and understood by all members;
- having agendas that encourage and celebrate a relaxed flow of different opinions;
- planning meetings that offer a mix of education from staff and visitors on priority issues and topics;
- including experimentation with digital tools for governance deliberations, such as those available from [BoardEffect](#).²

What are two to three ways you can improve the quality of your governing body meetings? What can you do personally to improve your contributions to these meetings?

2. BoardEffect website (Philadelphia, PA: BoardEffect, 2015). See: http://boardeffect.com/?utm_source=bing&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=BoardEffect%20Brand&utm_term=+boardeffect