

# Boardroom Bearings

Navigating to Board Excellence

October 2016



## YMCA Hosts a Lunch and Learn

While munching on sandwiches, board and senior staff at the Greater Joliet Area YMCA came together in August for a board training session. Board education is one of the responsibilities of the Y's new Governance Committee - established in 2015 to play an expanded role in building a high-performing board.

Ongoing board education can help the board carry out its work yet board education is an overlooked and underused practice in most organizations. But not at the Y where they feed the brain AND the stomach.

Marc Gorsch, Board Chair, said "Since board meeting agendas are often full, it's hard to work in a substantial board training element, so we came up with the lunch-and-learn idea." Twelve board members and nine staff members attended a session on the board's governance responsibilities conducted by Katheryn Wiedman, Centerpoint Institute.

Following the session, CEO Jim Watts wrote, "Thank you so much for the outstanding board presentation today! I had at least five take-away ideas we will implement." Wiedman has delivered board training sessions to four other Joliet, IL area nonprofits in recent weeks.



Image courtesy of Mister GC at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

## Keep Meetings Interesting to Keep Board Members Engaged

This article is #3 of a four-part series on productive meetings. See the [July issue Boardroom Bearings](#) for tips about agendas and August for tips about meeting preparation. Here we look at the meeting itself.



Image courtesy of Stuart Miles at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

First, understand that the board GOVERNS. That means it steers the organization. Boards cannot steer very well if they are looking in the rear-view mirror all the time. Board meetings that consist of reports on what happened last month are not only boring, they can be dangerous because the focus is on the past. Make sure that the majority of the board's time is spent talking about the future.

Send the board packet in advance of the meeting so board members can read the reports and meeting time is not consumed with things that have already transpired. Instead, challenge board members with questions and topics that stimulate their thinking. Board service will suddenly become interesting.

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Here are some other ways to enliven meetings:

- Change the seating arrangements regularly to promote interaction between different board members.
- Have brief, small group discussions - two to three people in a group - to deliberate a particular topic.
- Occasionally focus a large part of a meeting on a serious topic that requires in-depth discussion – such as liability issues, fundraising plans, or quarterly review of the strategic plan.
- Make sure each meeting has an educational component: trends in the organization's field, new legislation and regulations, results of an experimental program, etc.
- End board meetings with a re-cap of decisions that were made, actions to be taken (when and by whom), and on-going work or issues that will be taken up at a future meeting.
- Evaluate board meetings from time to time. Mix up the methods. Use index cards or a short questionnaire. Or ask a board member to play the role of meeting-process-observer and provide feedback. Maybe have a short reflection session at the end of the meeting: what did we do well; what could we do better?

## Readings on Meetings

For those of you who want to dig a little deeper to enliven your meetings, here are a few helpful articles:

[5 Levers of Nonprofit Board Creativity](#), Laramie Board Learning Project, Debra Beck.

[5 Ways Meetings Get Off Track and How to Prevent Each One](#), Harvard Business Review, Roger Schwarz.

[5 ways you can stop wasting time in meetings](#), Diane Decker, Association of Consultants to Nonprofits.

[We Have to Stop Meeting Like This! Your Meeting Bill of Rights](#), Leadership Strategies.

[Smooth Sailing into Your Next Board Meeting](#), Jennifer Chandler, National Council of Nonprofits.

[The Rules of Engagement: 5 Ways to Engage Your Bored Room](#), Leadership Strategies.

[What do you talk about at your board meetings?](#) Simone Joyaux, ACFRE, Joyaux Associates, in Nonprofit Quarterly.



## Recommended Governance Practices: the Leading Ones

BoardSource has decades of experience working with tens of thousands of board leaders and conducting extensive research on board practices in all kinds of nonprofit organizations. The organization has distilled 29 recommended governance practices that, when adopted and practiced by boards, lead to improved effectiveness. The 29 recommended practices are divided into three categories: 1) Essential Practices, 2) Leading Practices, and 3) Compliance Practices.

This article is the second in a four-part series. In the [August issue of Boardroom Bearings](#) we listed the 8 Essential Practices; in this and the next two issues, we'll cover the



other practices. **See how your organization's board stacks up!**

There are 16 Leading Practices - things that exemplary boards do above and beyond the Essential Practices. Eight are listed below with the other eight coming next month.

**Consent Agendas:** Consent agendas promote good time management in meetings. They relieve boards from administrative details and routine tasks freeing up time for the board to focus on issues of real importance to the organization's future.

**Executive Sessions:** Exemplary boards have regularly scheduled executive sessions. Executive sessions ensure confidentiality, increase board independence, and enhance relationships among board members and with the chief executive. (Organizations subject to sunshine/open meeting laws should verify their state statutes regarding executive sessions).

**Board Diversity and Inclusion:** The board is intentional in its recruitment and engagement of diverse board members and fosters a culture of inclusivity. The board establishes written policies relating to diversity and inclusion and ensures equal access to board leadership opportunities.

**Board Evaluation:** The board conducts a comprehensive self-assessment approximately every two years and implements identified improvements.

**Board Orientation:** The board has a formal orientation for new members that ensures all board members have relevant and consistent information on their governance responsibilities, the organization, and the board's expectations.

**Bylaws Review:** the board periodically reviews its bylaws to ensure compliance and to make amendments when necessary.

**Chief Executive Serving on the Board:** The chief executive is an ex officio, non-voting member of the board.

**Board Job Description:** The board has a written job description that specifies the responsibilities of the board as a whole. The board also has a written job description that specifies the responsibilities of board members as individuals.

## How Do Nonprofit Leaders Manage Unsolicited "Great Ideas?"

Here is a useful blog by nonprofit management writer, Eugene Fram. It begins, "What does a board member or CEO do when a donor or valued volunteer approaches him/h with a great idea that needs to be implemented at once?"



"Since most of these ideas are what a Stanford professor terms bad ideas, the board chair and CEO are often between a hypothetical rock and a hard place! To agree to a proposed project that is impractical or irrelevant to the mission will put the nonprofit at risk. But to reject an eager volunteer or potential donor could have serious donor-related financial or interpersonal consequences."

If you have ever been in that position, [check out the blog here](#).

A rubric – an evaluation tool or set of guidelines used to promote the consistent application of criteria - is proposed to help nonprofit leaders address this "wicked" type of problem.

## Question of the Month



## Q: Should we have an advisory board?



**A:** For some reason, I have been asked three times in the past month about whether an organization should start an advisory board. My answer is always the same: whatever you do, don't call it a BOARD. Call it an Advisory Council. Advisory Committee. Advisory Team. Advisory Panel. Any of those are fine. I think calling any group a "board" opens the door to role confusion. Your organization should have only one board - the

Board of Directors.

Here is a really great article for anyone thinking about starting an advisory group: "[Advisory Boards and Other Bodies: Yes or No and Why or Why Not?](#)" (Clearly the author doesn't agree with me about using the word "board" but I still like her article).

And for those readers who already HAVE an advisory group, an article on the Centerpoint Institute website may be useful to you. It is from BoardSource: [Advisory Councils: Nine Keys to Success](#). (Articles are listed alphabetically).

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### Please remember:

You are invited to submit questions by emailing them to [kdw@centerpointinstitute.com](mailto:kdw@centerpointinstitute.com). And if you have a troubling governance issue and need someone to talk with, confidentially, at no charge, call 815-545-1300 or send an email.

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