

Creating Effective and Engaged Boards

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At Ewald Consulting, we provide association management and government relations for a wide variety of professions including psychologists, economic developers, property managers, cardiologists, researchers, publishers, child care, trainers, fleet leasing dealers, well drillers and more.

The one factor that all of these professional associations have in common is the desire to have an effective association. This starts with an effective board leading the association and ultimately effective and productive board meetings.

Quick exercise - At your next board meeting, have your board members individually list the top three issues facing members and see if they are the same that the organization has determined as a whole in their vision and mission. Also, are they truly in sync with the membership? If you get different answers from board members, chances are the members may have different answers as well. Make sure that you all have the same "elevator pitch" for your organization to communicate better and stay focused.

With over twenty-five clients, we've identified common attributes of effective Boards:

- Buy-in to mission of organization
- Come to meeting prepared – read
- Understand role of staff and board
- Respect each other and keep each other accountable
- Stay strategic and out of the day-to-day
- Focus on relevant issues

Each of us within our organizations has to deal with the following realities in the business environment:

- Time – People are busy/multiple priorities
- Attention economy – rapid growth of information causes scarcity of attention
- Technology – BlackBerries, blogs, MySpace, Facebook, instant messaging, LinkedIn...What's next?

Given these realities, association leaders need to...

- Plan effectively and efficiently
- Make the most of in-person meetings
- Connect between meetings
- Be accountable – don't over commit

- Develop future leaders – mentorship and identifying generational differences in style

Also, we need to develop our future leaders and work with Generation X and Y in the way they need. The strength of our boards and association will come from engage members from all generations who contribute to the organization in their own way, ultimately creating an energy and vibrancy in our associations. This community of involved members will drive the organization and draw potential members to the organization.

Ways to Engage Generations on the board and in the association:

- Start a Mentoring program – boomers can be apart of mentoring
- Invite Gen X and Gen Y on board even if they haven't "paid their dues"
- Start Young Professional Groups
- Shorter and focused meetings...
- Make decisions
- Share information
- Learn from one another
- Create buy-in

In the context of all of us being "meeting-ed out," we need to make sure our board meetings are meaningful and productive. According to "*The Seven Sins of Deadly Meetings*" article by Eric Matson, the key items to avoid in your meetings:

- Arriving late and leaving early
- Meetings that are too long
- Getting off-topic
- Poor follow-through
- Diluted opinion sharing
- Insufficient preparation
- Stagnant/stale content

We've all experience one if not all of these items in meetings that we have been involved in. Make sure they don't happen in your board meeting.

Before your meeting starts, set the following common ground rules to ensure an effective board meeting:

- Attend all meetings and be on time
- ACTIVELY listen to and show respect for the opinions of others
- Follow the agenda – stay on track
- The only stupid question is the one that isn't asked
- Ensure that credit is given to those to whom it is due
- No disruptive side conversations
- Cell phones, BlackBerries, and pagers off

Creating effective and engaging boards that truly represent the membership is the first step to creating an engaged membership and a mission and purpose that will transcend time and generations.

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She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Minnesota - Minneapolis and completed the Institute for Organization Management at the University of Notre Dame. In December 2003, she earned her Certified Association Executive (CAE) designation.