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Catalysts for Common Good

Board Meeting Packets, a CBLD Field Guide

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Why they matter

A meeting packet should help directors prepare for the meeting. After reading the packet, a director should know what the meeting will be about and should have all the information necessary to fully participate in all discussions and to make any decisions that the board will make at the meeting. Establishing a rhythm and discipline in creating, distributing and reading meeting packets can help make the board meetings themselves that much more productive and enjoyable.

What goes in them

A meeting packet is a unit: one clearly defined collection of documents. Giving lots of scattered pieces of information over a longer period of time can make it very difficult for directors to know if they have everything they need, or to know if what they have is even pertinent to the meeting.

The packet generally should include: the agenda, the previous meeting's minutes, written reports (like GM monitoring reports or committee reports), and any background or explanatory materials (educational articles, rationale for proposed decisions, etc.) that are relevant to specific agenda items. The agenda can help everyone prepare for and participate in the meeting if each item includes a reference to relevant documents in the packet. Some boards also like to have a table of contents that shows everything that is included in the packet.

Confidential materials for an executive session can be separated from the other items, but still distributed at the same time. Extraneous documents or information not related to the agenda can be distributed separately so that directors can focus attention on what's necessary for their work at the meeting.

Logistics

A "meeting packet" might be a collection of paper or electronic documents, or a single electronic or paper document that includes everything. The packet might be available for pickup at a central location, or distributed through email, or found in an online repository (like Dropbox, Google Drive, Basecamp, etc.). Whatever system you use, the key is that board members know they can find everything they need, all in one place and at a predictable time.

Having the material well in advance of each meeting allows directors plenty of time to fit this homework into their busy lives. If directors only get a document just before (or worse, at) the meeting, they probably won't have enough time to read and understand the material well enough to participate responsibly in the conversation and decision-making process. For most boards, 5-7 days in advance works well.

It makes sense to delegate to one person the responsibility for compiling and distributing the packet. Typically, the General Manager (or a board administrator supervised by the GM) can be

responsible for this task; for organizations with very limited staff resources, the board secretary could do this work.

Discipline

High-functioning boards attend to two sorts of meeting preparation discipline. First, the board will have a stated expectation that all directors read the packet in advance. Directors on these boards hold each other accountable for coming to the meeting ready to participate in a fully-informed way. Second, the board will generally postpone agenda items if the relevant documents were not included in the packet.

If your board has not already established this sort of discipline, don't despair. Just get started on building these expectations by letting folks know what's coming, allowing for a few mis-steps at the beginning of the process, and then holding the line on discipline by requiring your directors and manager to be prepared for the meeting and by tabling agenda items for which the board is not adequately prepared.

If directors can regularly anticipate when and how they will receive the meeting packet, they can also plan for the time they will need to read the materials. And if the board can anticipate that everyone will be fully prepared, then the meetings can become crucibles for high-level thinking and decision-making.

Related Resources

- Your Best Meeting Ever
- A Recipe for Good Board Meetings
- Board Agenda Template
- Minute Taking Essentials