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Wasting Hours on Minutes

Bob Harris, CAE

The directors griped, “We start the meeting with the first order of business being approval of the previous minutes. An hour is wasted talking about what we did at the last meeting and whether the information is accurate.”

Losing the first hour of a board meeting is deflating. The directors arrive enthusiastic about achieving results. Instead, their eyes roll when they hear, “I don’t think that’s what I said in the minutes.”

“Time is a resource that in some cases has more value than gold. Time stolen is not given back and should be managed with care. I am a believer of crafting of minutes closely aligned with the meeting agenda,” explains Michael Jackson, BPharm, EVP and CEO, Florida Pharmacy Association.

Steps to prevent this time waster at board meetings.

Agenda Design – Jackson at FPA suggests a close connection to agenda design and the minutes that will be generated. The form of the agenda will be reflected in the format of the minutes. There will be less confusion as directors can relate agenda items to the resulting minutes.

Time is Money – Assign a value to each person’s time of at least \$100 per hour. A board of 15 people spending the first hour talking about minutes will have spent \$1,500. Far worse is the cost of opportunities lost because the board ran out of time.

Distribution – Minutes from the prior meeting should be distributed quickly. They serve as a reminder of what was accomplished, and commitments made. Seldom is there benefit to waiting until the next meeting to present the previous minutes. Adopt a policy that minutes will be distributed so many days after adjournment.

Consent – Use a consent agenda to distribute information-only reports, for example, the president’s report, membership update, and minutes. Distribute a week or more before the board meeting to give directors time to review, question and correct reports in advance.

Control – Leaders arrive knowing there is much to be accomplished. It is frustrating if the chair allows the start of the meeting to be bogged down by minutiae. The negativity may set the tone for the rest of the meeting.

Time Markers – Indicate time markers next to agenda items. If directors know 3-minutes are allocated for approval of the minutes, when the time extends to 10 or 20 minutes, anybody can ask that we move ahead.

Mission Driven – Governance is about advancing the organization’s purpose. All directors are empowered to ask, “How does this discussion advance our mission and priorities?”

Brief is Better - Avoid recording statements about who said what or capturing side-bar conversations. Minutes are NOT a set of notes or reminders for volunteers

Director Orientation – Familiarize directors to their responsibilities. By understanding governance expectations there should be little interest in focusing on prior minutes that could have been corrected when they were distributed. “Being fully prepared for meetings is part of the job description for board members, and the annual board orientation provides the opportunity for setting these expectations,” says Jennifer Martin, MBA, CAE, Executive Director, New York School Nutrition Association.

Preparing – Advance reading is a responsibility of directors. Use the time between meetings to ask questions of staff and committees. Arriving at a board meeting ill-prepared will slow board progress.

Accuracy – Who should take the minutes, a volunteer, or staff member? It should be the person who most accurately records a set of minutes that protect the organization and communicate the board fulfilled its fiduciary roles. If the recording secretary does a poor job, ask somebody else. (Avoid tape recording minutes for liability issues.)

Discourage the board from wasting hours correcting minutes.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.