

Governance

Shake Up Your Board Meeting

Boring nonprofit board meetings are deadly.

By [Curtis Chang](#) | Aug. 1, 2013

The board meeting. Members secretly check their email on tablets while pretending to review documents. Those calling in offer only silence, their phones on permanent mute. Everyone feels the heaviness in the room as someone recounts minutes from the last meeting, another issues a plea to serve on the fundraising committee (yet again), and the treasurer tediously recites financial figures.

But the most important casualty of this boredom is not the time that board members spend at meetings. Unexciting board meetings are deadly because they sap the vitality of the mission.

Something is boring when nothing meaningful is immediately at stake. Yet meaning and urgency supply the oxygen for nonprofit efforts. An organization is alive when it throbs with the sense that lives are hanging in the balance. To stay alive, it must constantly renew this feeling in everyone involved.

Dull board meetings suck out this life-giving air at the very top. The board is the governing authority; when its meetings lack excitement, this dullness eventually pervades the rest of the organization. If board members are not passionately debating whether the organization is making enough progress, then the executive director must generate urgency by herself (a recipe for burnout). If board members aren't imagining what doubling the budget could do—and throwing down the gauntlet before the others, based on their own fundraising efforts—it usually translates to staff members not feeling like they can dream big.

So how can executive directors and board chairs inject more passion into board meetings? Here are some ideas and resources to help make things interesting.

1. Threaten. Try building a meeting around a provocative question that would jeopardize the organization. For example:

- What changes to our environment could put us out of business?
- What would happen if we had to merge with a competitor?
- If our budget were slashed in half, what would we do?
- If the executive director died tomorrow in an auto accident, what would we do?

Any organization that asks itself these kinds of questions will emerge with some important insights.

It may seem threatening to ask these questions, but that is precisely the point. As great literature reveals, much insight comes from drama. And drama requires some sense of threat: the belief that something important is at stake. Read here to learn more about [the value of scenario planning for nonprofit organizations](http://grantspace.org/Tools/Knowledge-Base/Nonprofit-Management/Sustainability/Contingency-and-scenario-planning). (<http://grantspace.org/Tools/Knowledge-Base/Nonprofit-Management/Sustainability/Contingency-and-scenario-planning>)

2. Grade. Nothing quickens the pulse more than an examination, especially when the results could have real consequences. The board should annually evaluate the executive director's performance and tie financial bonuses to it. Similarly, board members ought to evaluate each other, and their contributions to the nonprofit (including fundraising) should be a condition of continued membership. [Here are some tips on how boards can do self-assessments](https://www.boardsource.org/eweb/DynamicPage.aspx?Site=bds2012&WebKey=b4d661b5-4af4-4560-ab74-29f665ffa3cc).

(<https://www.boardsource.org/eweb/DynamicPage.aspx?Site=bds2012&WebKey=b4d661b5-4af4-4560-ab74-29f665ffa3cc>)

3. Humanize. Board members are only human; we all need a reminder of why we're doing something in the first place. Have a client come in and share a testimony. Go on site visits. Invite an expert in the field to make a presentation. Getting the board to connect with staff members can especially be helpful. One executive used a board dinner to [bring in young, high-potential staff members to make short pitches for their programs](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/business/ilene-gordon-of-ingredion-on-the-importance-of-mentors.html?_r=0). (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/business/ilene-gordon-of-ingredion-on-the-importance-of-mentors.html?_r=0) This exercise gave the board insight into future leaders and was a great leadership development exercise for the staff.

These are just three of my favorite ideas. There are numerous other techniques you can use to [liven up governance discussions](http://www.gailperry.com/board-training/get-your-board-members-fired-up-and-in-action-for-the-cause-articles/12-ways-to-liven-up-your-board-meetings-%E2%80%94and-your-board/) (<http://www.gailperry.com/board-training/get-your-board-members-fired-up-and-in-action-for-the-cause-articles/12-ways-to-liven-up-your-board-meetings-%E2%80%94and-your-board/>). So go on, and shake up that next board meeting.

Read more stories by [Curtis Chang](https://ssir.org/bios/curtis_chang) (https://ssir.org/bios/curtis_chang) .



Curtis Chang is the founder and CEO of **Consulting Within Reach (CWR)**, a team of experts from both corporate and nonprofit backgrounds that uses professional skills to serve social entrepreneurs. Curtis's own diverse vocational path has included teaching public policy at Harvard, doing development work in Africa, and running a family foundation.

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