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Sabotaging the Consent Agenda

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The board chair said, “To save time we will use a consent agenda. We will be distributing routine reports in advance. I’m asking you to prepare for meetings by doing the reading.”

A consent agenda is an efficient board practice. It allows the board to focus on the substantive issues such as mission and its core competencies.

About a week before the meeting, when the agenda is distributed, the routine reports are provided to directors. At the board meeting, the package of reports and updates by committees, officers and staff can be handled with a *single motion*, “I move we accept the reports as distributed.” Any reports deemed controversial or needing board action can be removed from consent and put on the regular agenda.

“Switching to a consent agenda allowed us to use our time together more wisely. Rather than hearing committee reports, that can be read prior to the meeting, we now focus on our strategic plan and board development,” explains Jennifer Martin, MBA, executive director at the New York School Nutrition Association.

Cultural Change

Some organizations are reluctant to adopt the process, change can seem awkward. You might hear, “We’ve always done it this way.

A few organizations successfully adopt the consent practice, only to fall back into bad habits that waste valuable time.

When it comes to saving time and being efficient, hardly anybody objects. So how does the concept get sabotaged?

Jeopardy

There may be resistance to using a consent agenda. Some boards feel that if a volunteer prepared the report, they should have time on the agenda to present it. Some directors say they have no time to read advance materials.

Here’s what jeopardized the process:

Deadlines – The reports must be prepared in a timely manner to be attached to the meeting announcement or agenda. Some committees may not be good at writing summary reports. Provide a template for committees to keep reports to one page. Encourage the use of bullets rather than paragraphs.

Meeting submission deadlines can be problematic. People are inclined to wait until the actual meeting to think about their report. The consent agenda requires reports a week or two in advance.

When deadlines are missed, the lax board chair might excuse the omissions and let people have time on the agenda for reporting. Discipline is key.

Breach of Duty – To prepare for meetings directors have been told to read the advance reports (a fiduciary duty). Listening to the questions at the table, it is obvious some directors neglected their duty. A diligent chair will notice the breach, advising, “I expect directors to come prepared to our board meetings.”

Regurgitation – The reports were prepared, distributed and read in advance by the board. A motion was passed at the start of the meeting to accept the reports. But some directors keep asking questions about the reports after the package was approved. The board chair let’s the transgression occur, using up valuable time for governance and strategy.

Hybrid Option

Encourage the board to try the concept for a year. If the board is uncomfortable with the consent process, offer a hybrid solution. The chair might allow report highlight to be discussed, with time limits. For example, allowing two minutes for the authors to make comments. Most boards don’t look back once they’ve adjusted to not wasting time on reports and updates.

Volunteer and staff time is irreplaceable. An easy formula to determine the value of a meeting would be to multiply the number of people attending by the length of the meeting and a value of at least \$100 per person attending for their leadership contribution. For instance, 15 people x 3 hours x \$100 equals \$4,500.

Governance should focus on advancing the mission and strategic goals, not reading and listening to reports.

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