

# Is Your Nonprofit Board Bored? Eight Ways to Keep Them Awake

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Are your nonprofit board members nodding off at your board meetings? Or maybe not even showing up?

They may be afflicted with nonprofit boardroom ennui resulting from not having anything of substance to think about or do.

Robert Herman and Associates, authors of *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*, say they have found no correlation of board effectiveness or lack thereof to factors such as board size, committee structure, or the number and duration of board meetings.

But they do suggest that the way board meetings function may have a dramatic effect on a board member's engagement. If you mount mind-numbing show-and-tell meetings with predetermined outcomes, it will be no wonder that board members are asleep at the wheel or missing in action.

Here are some ways you can perk up those meetings and make board members feel that they are actually doing something:

1. Bundle routine items into a consent agenda for issues that need board approval but not board discussion so they can be dispensed with quickly and easily.
2. Design a session within a board meeting that encourages dialog about an issue, not decision making. Make the issue something of substance and include a summary of the discussion with the next board minutes.
3. Break the board into small groups for a discussion. Design the groups carefully so that shy board members are not with overbearing members. This will encourage speaking up and creativity.
4. Use an outside facilitator for discussion of issues. This will free the board chair and the CEO so they cannot so easily nudge the discussion in any one direction. The facilitator should be adept at using methods such as brainstorming.
5. Set up periodic retreats away from the usual meeting site. When working with the Girl Scouts in St. Louis, we took the board members to one of our camps for an overnight. This allowed board members to bond and loosen up which favored good discussions.
6. Even during regular board meetings, the chair should set the stage for dialog by framing the context of the issue, explaining a possible strategy, or identifying the questions the board should address.
7. Make sure that your board chair is someone who is genuine about inviting board members to raise concerns, voice criticisms, and express their ideas even when they challenge the status quo.
8. Provide information in your board packets that will help board members think about issues that will be discussed at the meeting. Include an article to read or a list of questions to think about.

Engaged nonprofit board members are happy board members. Create an environment that is encouraging to that engagement and invite your board members to think about strategy, not just administrative trivia.

Resource: *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*, Robert D. Herman & Associates, 2005, Jossey-Bass.

