

Use questions when drafting board meeting agendas

In “What If Agenda Items Were Questions,” Cyrus White, president of the St. Louis-based South Cabin Group, spells out several key benefits to framing your board’s agenda items as questions. For example:

- **It encourages participation.** White argues that questions naturally invite responses and tend to generate more questions, all of which leads to more board members involved in the discussion.

“By presenting the work of the board as a series of questions, the agenda can encourage directors to engage issues, offer opinions, and seek facts,” White writes.

He continues, “In trying to answer an agenda question, directors may discover they need additional information that supports and strengthens their decision-making.”

- **It can help focus the discussion.** How a question is framed can have a big impact on what is being discussed and where the discussion leads, White says. When questions are drawn up the right way, they can help guide members to move past routine topics and toward more strategic thinking.

“It’s the difference between asking ‘What happened in our programs last quarter?’ and asking ‘How did we deliver intended benefits to our clients, and [at] what cost or value?’ White says. The latter provides better guideposts for the board members by providing additional direction.

- It keeps the board on track and out of the weeds. A well-phrased question can also direct board members away from areas they shouldn’t be involved in, White says.

“Asking only ‘Shall we approve the annual budget?’ can quickly divert the board out of its governance role and into areas best delegated to management. But asking ‘Does this budget support efforts to achieve our intended results?’ offers an opportunity for the board and CEO to talk about finances in ways that respect their distinct roles,” he says.

The questions should be structured so that they direct the board toward making policy decisions, monitoring performance against those policies or gathering information that’s needed to do its work, he adds.

For more insights from White and his consulting firm, visit <http://cyruswhite.com>. ■

Mind the value of personal connections

It may sound like a no-brainer, but the value of personal relationships in the nonprofit sector can’t be overstated, according to Randy Bernhardt, president of Bernhardt Consulting in Albuquerque.

In a blog post on this topic, Bernhardt drives home a simple truth: People give to people and people buy from people. In other words, the personal connections that nonprofit CEOs, staff and board members have cultivated through their time in the field are valuable and a critical source of revenue, both direct and indirect. And this has to be considered if a change is being considered.

“Case in point: The board of a nonprofit organization that had been financially successful

for more than a decade restructured the organization,” he writes. “An executive was informed that they would no longer have a role at the organization. In the years that followed, the organization lost more than \$3 million in revenue and has been deficit spending ever since.”

He attributes the decline to the loss of deep connections the executive had—that no one else had, and that could not be easily replaced.

It doesn’t mean that such changes can’t be implemented—just be prepared to address the impact that losing valuable personal relationships will have on the organization.

For more information, visit <http://bit.ly/2sTjTzh>. ■