



*Why Organizations Go Off Course – Lesson 7: Prioritize Effective Board Meetings*  
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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Go Off Course*. The article details a series of lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),<sup>1</sup> buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

This series offers a counterpoint to the lessons in my other series: *Why Organizations Thrive*.

Why Organizations Go off Course Lesson Seven is: Prioritize Effective Board Meetings

Some might feel this fits in the “of course” category. Yet, I’ve encountered too many examples of ineffective board meetings not to include it in the lesson list for *Why Organizations Go Off Course*.

Two of my past lessons covered a couple ways in which board meetings can be ineffective. They can continually rehash past decisions (Lesson 6). They can stifle conflict instead of exposing and respectfully resolving it (Lesson 4).

Here are three other ways I’ve seen board meetings go awry over the last two decades, along with the consequences for the organization.

1. Late and incomplete board packets

In general, the board packet should contain an agenda, minutes from the last meeting, a report from the Executive Director summarizing major activities since the last meeting (or Report), the most recent financial statements and any accompanying memo evaluating the organization’s financial performance, board committee reports, other important program updates from staff, and any other policy documents that are up for consideration/amendment, along with accompanying reasons.

Packets should ideally go out a week prior to a meeting or, an absolute minimum of three days.

Failure to create an effective and/or timely board packet means wasted time at meetings reporting orally on the same material. Beyond wasted time, it’s almost always the case that oral reporting creates more opportunity for misunderstanding than a written report.

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<sup>1</sup> I served as OLCV’s Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around \$200,000 to more than \$1 million.

The irony is that getting the board packet out late because the leader is trying to save time – only the consequence is almost always the opposite.

## 2. Not ending on time as a symptom of poorly conducted meetings

Once in a blue moon, it's okay to run over time. But it sets a terrible pattern if meetings always run over, suggesting agendas aren't been created properly for the time allotted or the conduct of the meeting itself is bogged down in the weeds or repeatedly off-topic.

One organization I was involved with had this problem repeatedly and their response was to increase the length of the board meetings. This had the opposite effect of what was desired as subsequent meetings turned out to be even more chaotic.

A good agenda shouldn't just list topics, it should clearly identify the expected time for each, so that a board chair and Executive Director can manage the meeting to know they are on track. If an item is running long, that can often be evidence that it should be tabled so that more information can be generated.

## 3. Trying to cover every topic

Repeatedly, I've seen board agendas that try to cover every topic of concern to the organization, rather than asking the question: which of these topics do we **have** to cover at this meeting.

Remember the purpose of board meetings: to make important decisions, to expose and resolve conflict, to coordinate future activities, and to help the board meet its responsibilities as financial stewards of the organization.

Rather than rushing through six significant topics, focus on three and then get to the next three at the next meeting.

The consequence of rushing is that people are less likely to feel heard, lessening their support for the outcomes.

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In the end, a good board meeting takes a partnership between the board chair and Executive Director (if there is staff), and a board that overall sets expectations for professionalism.

The consequence of failing to run good board meetings, aside from what's already been discussed, include an unwillingness of high-quality board members to stay involved, low morale, and failure to make strategic decisions.

Usually, all of the above is a consequence of a board chair and/or Executive Director not prioritizing the board meeting. They would be better off making the board meeting a top priority on their to-do list and only move onto other tasks when they're confident the meeting is set up for success.