

12 Tips to for a more Engaged Board

Most organizations I've encountered desire an increased level of engagement by their board. Here are 12 tips or strategies that you can use to generate higher levels of engagement. They are not in any particular order.

1. Make it somebody's job to think about board engagement

It generally won't happen by chance. Somebody should be tasked with thinking about how to accomplish it and then act on the best thinking. Usually that's a Board Governance Committee that also is charged with board recruitment. Alternatively, it could be an Executive Committee.

2. Have clear roles and responsibilities

Role confusion can lead to a lack of engagement. The more clarity people have of what's expected of them the better. You should have written statements of responsibilities for board members overall and specific roles, such as officers and committees/task forces. These responsibilities should be initially communicated in an effective board orientation.

3. Don't waste your board's time

Nothing kills engagement faster than the board feeling you're wasting their time. A separate Tip Sheet covers how to run efficient and effective board meetings. Among the most important tips are to begin and end meetings on time, to use active facilitation to keep on topic and make decisions, and to avoid topics that get into details that only a small subset of the board need to talk about.

4. Avoid cliques

Too often new board members are brought in and they encounter a set of long-time board members who act as a clique. To counteract that, be mindful of overuse of specialized language, excessive jargon, or referring to people not in the room by first name and assuming everyone knows who's being talked about. Go out of your way to find opportunities to bring older and newer board members together in social settings.

5. Tap into the board's expertise

If a board member has appropriate expertise, use it. This may be the expertise that was behind your recruitment of the board member. But it may be something you discover. That doesn't mean you must defer to them as expert. But it does mean giving them an opportunity to feel particularly valued.

6. Step back to help others step forward

If your group has one or a small number of strong Type A leaders, it may be their leadership actually is creating a dynamic in which others disengage to balance things out. Talk to your Type A leaders and ask them to step back on some key tasks to give space for others to step up – even if that means a higher risk of failure on specific tasks.

7. Use post-meeting memos

Don't rely on board minutes as the sole means of maintaining continuity after meetings. Instead, generate regular memos within 48 hours of any board meeting summarizing what was covered, what major decisions were made, and what tasks were taken on.

This benefits (a) those who missed the meeting and may quickly find themselves out of the loop and (b) those who attended the meeting and need to verify what tasks they may have taken on.

8. Have one big-picture topic at every meeting

This also shows up in the Tips about Effective Board Meetings.

If the board gets dragged down too much into the weeds, it can be numbing for most participants. Boards generally get more excited when offered the opportunity to think big picture and further than a few months into the future. These are the topics most likely to bring out the board's creativity and passion.

9. Make specific asks, not general requests

Don't just send out emails asking: "who can do this volunteer task?" Ask specific people: "Jessica, can you do this?" There is something in human psychology that shows across many contexts that it's easier for people to ignore general requests for help than ones directed clearly at them.

10. Provide training

Don't assume your board members come to the board well-equipped for the specific tasks asked of them. Whether it's fundraising, presenting, or some other way you're asking them to engage – think about providing them specific training. Board members are more likely to engage if they feel they've been given adequate support of this kind.

11. Have a culture of accountability

Those who start out engaged will start to disengage if they see a culture in which commitments aren't followed.

Generating this culture starts with a board chair and board governance chair who're willing to have tough conversations with any board members who've on more than one occasion taken on a task and let the team down. In cases where a board member clearly isn't meeting their responsibilities, this should mean choosing to not reelect a board member to another term.

12. Keep the team connected to the mission

A board that's so focused on governance that it feels disconnected from the mission can lose their passion for the cause. Find opportunities for the board to experience first-hand the work of the organization. That may look very different across different types of organizations – whether it's interacting with those being served, locations being protected, etc.