



Effective Meetings for Library Boards of Trustees

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INTRODUCTION

Being a member of the library's Board of Trustees is an important and wonderful way to serve your community. Whether your library is a city or county department, or an independent agency, the Board is the body that is ultimately accountable for ensuring that the money the library receives is well spent and that the services the library provides are equally accessible to all.

While it might not seem glamorous, the truth is that the majority of time a Board member spends in service to the library will be at the monthly Board meeting. It is important, therefore, that these meetings are structured in a way that ensures they are productive and allow for the intellectual input of all board members in determining how well the library is meeting its obligations to the citizens it serves.

Sally Gardner Reed
Executive Director, United for Libraries

OPERATING PROCEDURE

The Board president who presides over the meeting (or the vice-president in the absence of the president) should be well acquainted with meeting rules. How many Trustees must be present to constitute a quorum? How will decisions be made – by a majority or by consensus? When will a Trustee be considered out of order? How can everyone be brought into critical discussions? There are many books available that can help guide you, perhaps the most famous of which is *Robert's Rules of Order*.

It is also very important for all Board members to understand their role as the *governing body* versus the library director's role as library *manager*. The Board should carefully avoid micromanaging the director in meetings. The library director is ultimately going to be evaluated on outcomes in various goal areas. Therefore, it is important that the director have the leeway needed to manage the process for arriving at successful outcomes. This means that the director manages staff, collection, services, programs, and all issues associated with general, day-to-day operations. Nothing will damage good working (functional) relationships more effectively than Board members who are not clear on where the line is drawn and damaged relationships will ultimately negatively affect the library and the quality of its services.

Here are some examples of what Board responsibilities are not:

Board Responsibility

Discuss the changing demographics in the community and ensure the collection development policy addresses the need to reflect diversity in the library's collection.

Pay attention to the monthly budget report and ask questions about any abnormalities, concerns, or surprising trends.

Discuss a significant drop-off in attendance at the pre-school story-times as noted in the director's library use report. The Board asks the director to report back on issues affecting story-time attendance.

NOT Board Responsibility

Decide that the library needs more Spanish language books, or needs particular titles. It is the director's job to determine how many and what titles belong in the collection.

Inform the director that he or she should turn down the thermostat to save on utilities or change office supply vendors to save money.

Instruct director to move the story-time to the afternoons to see if more children attend.

ATTENDANCE

Does it really matter? Yes! Because Board meetings are where Trustees are kept up-to-date on issues such as budget, services, staff, and policy – and because they are ultimately accountable for the responsible stewardship of these issues – it is imperative that all board members be required to attend. The Board should implement a Board policy that stipulates the number of unexcused absences and excused absences that will be permitted. Most guides on Parliamentary Procedure will dictate this in absence of your own policy.

An unexcused absence is one where the Trustee simply does not show up and has not notified anyone in advance. A good policy might excuse one of these absences since life does happen and people do sometimes forget. However, if the Trustee isn't serious enough about his or her service to the library to schedule for Board meetings or make a call to inform either the Board president or the library director that he or she can't make the meeting, it may be that the seat would be better filled by someone who is.

An excused absence is one where the Board member has called ahead and asked to be excused because of illness, travel, or other unforeseen conflict. Though there are many good reasons for missing a meeting, consistent absences should be considered unacceptable because it means that a seat that would otherwise be filled by a dependable person goes empty too often. Again, a good policy stipulating that one or two excused absences is acceptable in a year along with stating the procedure for removing a Board member who is unable to comply is important.

It is, of course, not enough for a Trustee to simply show up. He or she should be expected to contribute to discussions and should be required to have read the Board Packet in advance (see Board Packets on page 4). Good Board members show up and show up prepared to contribute!

AGENDA

A good agenda is the best tool you have for ensuring that a meeting goes smoothly, that all issues of importance are adequately addressed, and that everyone has an opportunity to contribute thoughts and ideas.

The Board president and the library director should work together on the agenda for each meeting well in advance. The library director will know best what items are “hot” at the moment and need to be addressed and the Board president may have issues he or she would like to discuss in the meeting. In addition to these “new business” items, there will be some standard agenda items such as a year-to-date budget report, library use statistics, opportunity for public comment, and a “state of the library” update from the director. Other issues that might be on a standard agenda are reports by a Friends of the Library and/or Foundation liaison.

To maximize the time available to discuss the most important items on the agenda, those that are fairly standard and don’t require an action (such as a vote) or discussion can be grouped together as a “consent agenda.” If the budget is tracking well, the use of the library is steady or “normal,” the Friends liaison has submitted a written report in lieu of attending, for example, these items can be grouped together for approval in one motion. Of course, any item in the “consent agenda” can be pulled out for discussion or action if a particular Trustee requests it. If the Board is unanimous in accepting the consent agenda, however, time will be freed up for the issues that do require action and/or discussion.

Another way to help move the agenda along is to mark those items that need “Action.” This way there will be a clear understanding at a glance that the discussion at hand will be leading to a vote. Approval of the minutes, approval of a new policy proposal, or a change in the Board’s operating procedures are examples of those that will require action.

Finally, manage the clock! Decide when the meeting will begin and end and include that information in the agenda. Each item on the agenda should be accorded a certain amount of time. These times should be flexible, of course, but if you’ve allotted five minutes for welcomes and introductions and you notice that almost ten minutes have gone by, you will know that it is time to firmly and gracefully bring this item to a close. The suggested time limits for each item will also help keep all Trustees focused and on track.

SAMPLE MEETING AGENDA

Anytown Public Library Board of Trustees

Meeting Agenda

Date: Monday, September 18, 2012
Time: 5:30-7:00 p.m.
Location: Central Library, Donnell Meeting Room

Meeting begins promptly at 5:30 p.m.

Welcome and introductions – 5 minutes

Approval of the minutes – 5 minutes (**Action Item**)

Director's Report – 15 minutes

Budget

New services

Use statistics

Policy Update, Collections – 30 minutes (**Action Item**)

Advocacy efforts – preparing for next year's budget – 15 minutes

Friends Report – 5 minutes

Foundation Report – 5 minutes

Public Comment – 10 minutes

Adjournment at 7 p.m.

BOARD PACKET

The Board Packet is developed by library staff and is sent out to each member of the Board so that it is received at least one week prior to the meeting. The Board Packet should contain helpful background information that supports the items of the agenda. Standard information usually includes:

- **Agenda.** This should be the top page of the Board Packet. It will include the date, time and location for the upcoming Board meeting and quickly gives an overview of what will be discussed and decided.
- **Minutes.** The Board's secretary (and this may be a library staff member who serves as secretary ex officio but has no vote) should ensure that minutes are sent to the director no later than one week following the meeting. The minutes may be distributed to the full Board simultaneously after the meeting but a written copy should still be included in the Packet.
- **State of the Library Report.** The director should include a short (one or two page) summary of significant issues and trends that have occurred since the last Board meeting. This report should address key issues and not get bogged down with a lot of details. The shorter and more concise this report, the more likely it will be read and will be valuable in focusing the Board members on what really matters.
- **Budget Report.** A useful report will show the library's expenditures to date versus the same time last year. It is also useful to see a report that compares expenditures to date versus the annual budget. For example, if the budget is 25% spent and you are 25% of the way through the year, you're right on track. A detailed report showing these measurements against each line item will help the Board to see if there are any apparent imbalances. Perhaps the materials budget is only 15% spent but the personnel budget is 30% spent. Are more staff being hired? Is this at the expense of the materials budget?

These are good questions to ask and you may find that because the library is doing an excellent job of promotion, use is way up thereby necessitating more staff. If the materials budget is the only line item large enough to absorb some of these unforeseen costs, this will be important to address in the next budget cycle by advocating a significantly higher budget next year due to your success!

At any rate, the Board is ultimately responsible for fiscal oversight so it is important to ask good questions and become familiar with the issues that drive the budget. *Important Note:* It is *not* the job of the Trustees to dictate solutions for any real or perceived budgetary problems. It *is* the job of the Trustees to ensure that spending supports the goals you've established with the director at the beginning of each year and to make sure the director knows that you expect the budget to be fully spent (but not over spent) by the year's end.

During the budget report, the Trustees should also be thinking ahead and asking questions about the budget forecast for next year. One of the most important jobs for the Board is to work hard to ensure that the library gets the funding it needs to meet its goals for service.

- **Library Use Statistics.** "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts." These words, commonly attributed to Albert

Einstein, ring very true when it comes to library use statistics. Use statistics don't necessarily measure a library's effectiveness, they can, however, highlight trends. Over the past two decades many libraries have seen the circulation of library books go down while the circulation of digital materials have sky-rocketed. By the same token, because libraries now offer internet access and that means that use of the library is now counted in additional ways such as number of library visits, number of online reference queries, and the time logged on the libraries computers.

Reports that show various measures of use against prior months and prior years give context to the data and help to show more clearly the changes occurring in the ways in which patrons are using the library.

In addition to these standard reports, the Board Packet might also include:

- **Policy Update.** It is good practice for a Board to review all the library's policies at least biennially. This doesn't mean that policies should change every year or every two years, but they should be reviewed on a regular basis to make sure they are still guiding library practice in a way that matches the library's mission and goals.
If a particular policy is up for review, a copy of the policy should be included in the Packet along with a brief report by the director that recommends modification or states that the policy is relevant as it stands, with explanation of either recommendation. This will give the Board members the information they need to re-authorize the policy or to recommend well thought out changes.
- **Friends Report.** It's important for the Trustees to include a report from the Friends group (oral, written or both) at each meeting. Friends are a significant factor in fundraising efforts, library promotion, and advocacy, so it makes sense that the Trustees are kept aware of their activities. In addition, including a Friends liaison and/or report strengthens the bond between the two groups making it much easier to coordinate advocacy and promotion efforts.
- **Foundation Report.** Typically library Foundations work to foster large gifts and donations from wealthy individuals and corporations for the library endowment. Often this is done through planned giving, ticketed events, grant writing, and one to one requests. It is common for a Board member to be on the Foundation Board. If this is the case, he or she might give an update or the Foundation president might include a written report for the Board packet.
- **Articles of Interest.** A high functioning Board is one that understands the broader context within which the library operates. The library director should keep the Board informed of issues that impact libraries whether they are at the national, state or local level. Pertinent articles and papers on these issues should be included with an explanation as to their import during the "Director's Report."

CONCLUSION

Effective meetings can move the organization forward. By spending this precious time in discussing policy issues, environmental concerns (what factors are effecting the library such as funding, population shifts, and political environment), and library goals; the Trustees can be a real boon to the director and to the community. Serving as a Trustee is a noble way to enhance one of your community's most valuable assets. It all starts with showing up and working productively together.