

Essay Title: Leadership Starts Before Board Meetings Begin Audio Essay: Disc 2 track 7

When the board of trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, Maryland completed a strategic plan a few years ago, it realized it would also have to revamp the way it did business.

Then-president, Nancy Proctor, said that the trustees' meetings typically ran long and included many items that didn't need board attention. "We realized," she said, "that if the congregation was going to grow it had to change the way it was governed."

The first task was to identify those issues that only the board could deal with. Proctor said, "If you don't know what the important issues are, the agenda can quickly get filled up with items that do not require discussion or action by the board."

Much of what determines the effectiveness of a meeting happens well before it starts. The agenda should be laid out a week or so before the meeting, in time for it to be mailed to board members with a packet of related materials, including staff reports. That way board members can show up for the meeting informed and ready to do business.

In some congregations what is worthy of the board's time is decided by an executive committee, in others by the president and the minister, perhaps joined by the vice president. Some boards operate on the principle that if an issue has no impact on the budget or on policy it should be decided at the committee level. This not only focuses the board on work that only it can do but also enriches committee work.

The Annapolis board starts each year with a retreat at which it sets strategic goals for the coming year, including who is accountable for what, and when.

Proctor says, "These goals drive the agenda." Here are other tools the board uses:

- Each board member and the minister write a monthly report that is e-mailed before the meeting. There are no oral presentations. Board members are asked to read the reports prior to each

meeting.

- Strategic reports on specific areas (reviewing progress, challenges, and where the congregation would like to be in three to five years on an issue) are scheduled for each meeting.
- Board officers meet a few days before each board meeting. As president, Proctor prepared the agenda, placing strategic items first. She says, “I emailed a draft a couple of days before the full meeting. We use a consent agenda which allows members to adopt items en-bloc without discussion. When this agenda is presented, any one can ask to extract an item. If someone does, then the item is removed and added to the regular agenda. No need for discussion or a second.”

Meetings at Annapolis begin with opening words and lighting of a chalice, followed by a check-in which can take up to 30 minutes. Proctor says, “While it may seem like this is not needed, it sets the tone that we are leaders of a faith community and that we minister to each other. We also have a board covenant which we read as opening words from time to time.”

She adds, “As president, I worked hard to keep people on track, discourage side conversations, and to keep things moving. No discussing the size of gravel for the parking lot on my watch. At the same time, laughter is good for the soul. People zone out after two hours. So it is a balancing act.”

When congregations in the UUA’s Ballou Channing District ask for assistance with board meetings, district executive William Zelazny suggests they do the following:

- Have a time during each meeting for discussion of visioning or long range planning. Put it early in the meeting so it won’t be dropped if time runs out.
- Appoint a process observer who can comment if the board strays off topic.
- Be firm about the end time.

At another congregation, the church board requests items a week in advance of the meeting. A day in advance, as many members of the board as possible meet to determine the agenda. At that meeting some items are delegated to committees or individuals without board action and some are deferred to future meetings.

Fifteen minutes before the end of the meeting the actions that need to happen before the next meeting are compiled, along with the name of the person who has agreed to do them. Items are also listed for next month’s meeting. Then the board does a quick process check, saying how the

meeting was for each member and what could have been done better. Meetings are generally completed in two hours.

Here are other tips from UU boardrooms:

- Have at least one person who is thoroughly versed in the bylaws so that bylaw questions don't have to be researched during the meeting.
- Keep a year-to-year schedule of matters that have to be tended to annually, like budget deadlines, so they don't create emergencies.
- Be mindful of habits that can take up valuable time. When the talkative minister of one church retired, the board found it finished its work about 30 minutes sooner.

At one fellowship the board officers, also known as the executive committee, meet two weeks before the board meeting to set the agenda and do “nuts and bolts” business that doesn't require full board approval. The Executive Committee also works on the wording of motions, which helps the Board meetings run smoothly. Said a former board president, “I hear a lot of positive comments from the Board about the meetings and our striving to keep them around one-and-a half hours or less.”

For more information and resources, go to: uua.org and click on Leaders

Resources

District staff are available to consult with boards that need help with their meetings. Your district staff can be found at: <http://www.uua.org/aboutus/professionalstaff/districtservices/index.shtml>

Resources on this topic can be found in the Leader's Library and include *The Congregational Handbook* which has a section on effective committees at:

<http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/congregationalhandbook/34729.shtml>

Also search at <http://www.uua.org/publications/interconnections/index.shtml> for the keyword “governing boards.”

There are also two books, *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders*, by Charles M. Olsen and *Church Meetings that Work*, by Gaylord Noyce.

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