

Trustee Insights

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY



7 Tips for Successful Online Board Meetings

Advanced planning and savvy facilitation ensure engagement

BY **ALYCE LEE STANSBURY**

The COVID-19 pandemic has prevented governing boards from convening in person at a time when leadership and decision-making has never been more important, especially for health care providers. It is not surprising that hospital and health system boards have risen to the challenge during these unprecedented times. Our research reveals that board meeting attendance has increased during the pandemic. Since board members

can join a meeting from anywhere, they are attending more regularly.

The biggest challenge with online meetings is sustaining board engagement, which is not a new problem. Prior to the pandemic, almost every board had a few members who arrived late, opened the meeting packet after they arrived, looked at their phone during the meeting, asked questions that were answered at the last meeting and/or left early. Virtual meetings, while convenient, have enabled some board members to tune in while tuning out of the meeting. This requires board and staff leaders to be savvy meeting planners and facilitators.

Here are seven tips for effective virtual board meetings:

1. Maximize the online meeting platform.

Nonprofits are using a variety of free or low-cost online video conferencing platforms, including Zoom, GoToMeeting, WebEx, Google Meet and Skype. They allow board members to see each other from their home or office while providing audio-only options for people with limited technology. Be aware that free plans typically limit the number of users and the meeting length. Once a platform is chosen, make time to learn how to maximize its features. Offer to host a test meeting or two to help board members become more familiar with using it to facilitate discussion and decision-making.

2. Prepare for the meeting.

The meeting host should turn off all notifications and close all other programs on their computer. This will improve their bandwidth, ensuring a smoother transmission of audio and video for participants. Consider recording virtual meetings, to share with board members who are unable to attend and also help prepare meeting minutes. But be sure to notify participants at the beginning of the meeting that it's being recorded. The CEO can assign an additional staff member

to help board members log in to the meeting, provide technical support during the meeting and monitor the chat box for questions.

A top complaint for online meetings is not being able to hear the speaker. Consider purchasing an external microphone for use by the chair rather than relying on the microphone on their computer or phone.

3. Plan a 20/20 agenda.

Nonprofit Learning Lab recommends planning the agenda with 20% fewer items and allowing 20% more time for the meeting and conversation. Many online meetings require repetition, clarification and additional time for discussion. The board chair should ask board members in advance to lead various agenda items within a set time frame.

4. Set ground rules.

Here are a few guidelines to create structure during online board meetings:

- Request that all board members turn on and use their video camera (if they have one) and audio, so everyone can be seen and heard during the meeting.
- Let participants know the board chair will recognize them before speaking to avoid everyone talking at once. Board members can raise their hand or use the “raise hand” feature.
- Ask everyone to use their mute button when not speaking to silence background noises.
- Schedule board meetings outside of usual mealtimes to avoid people eating on camera.
- Assign a board member or

Online Meeting Do's and Don'ts

- **Do:** Use PowerPoint to advance the agenda and highlight key data points being discussed. Use transition slides — with the consent agenda, action items and financial statements, for example — to frame the meeting and keep board members engaged.
- **Don't:** Take up the entire board meeting with a slide presentation. Instead, build in time for discussion.
- **Do:** Allow extra time for questions. People may need more time to process the information being shared, and it will take longer to respond to questions and comments.
- **Don't:** Crowd too much text onto one slide. Instead, use visuals and show the key points with as few words as possible. Use white backgrounds and easy-to-read black or dark fonts in 14 point or larger.
- **Do:** Provide detailed financial statements, committee reports, meeting minutes and other information in advance.
- **Do:** Add a phone number or email to the bottom of each slide for participants to use if they have technical problems, to avoid interrupting the meeting.
- **Don't:** Use animation in slides as it can interfere with the audio, depending on each user's internet speed. Streaming videos also can be problematic and should be tested in advance.
- **Do:** Limit breakouts to four people or fewer to give everyone an opportunity to speak. Allow ample time for everyone to join the breakout room, repeat the question and identify a notetaker.
- **Don't:** Allow one person to dominate discussion. Instead, be on alert for people who are not participating to ensure all board members are equally engaged in decision-making.
- **Do:** Allow for technical difficulties. Even the best preparation may not prevent a board member's laptop or tablet from freezing in midsentence or someone having to leave and reenter the meeting.

staff person to serve as a time-keeper for discussion.

5. Do more with less.

I recommend a maximum of 90 minutes for online board meetings. If additional time is needed, schedule a second meeting to maintain interest and engagement. If board members are located in multiple regions or states, list the

meeting time in all time zones to ensure everyone knows the correct start time.

6. Start and finish strong.

Start and close the meeting with purpose. To open, ask everyone to introduce themselves, or use the chat box if there are 10 or more attendees. To close, ask everyone for a final comment or use the rose/

thorn exercise for each member to share what worked well and what needs more work.

7. Use tech tools to improve facilitation.

Various functions such as polls, breakouts, whiteboard, and chat box are effective tools to seek input, encourage robust discussion and build consensus.

- Use the chat box to ask for a motion or second, respond to yes/no questions and share links for additional information.
- Use a poll to gauge interest and seek feedback on proposed actions, such as “What suggestions do you have to improve future online meetings?”

- For a mission moment, create a quiz using three facts about the delivery of services, such as the number of patients served or the cost to help one patient.

- To increase engagement, use additional tools like the game-based learning platform Kahoot! or Poll Everywhere, which creates a word cloud from participant feedback in real time.

Alyce Lee Stansbury, CFRE,
(alycelee@stansburyconsulting.com)
is president of Stansbury Consulting, a nonprofit governance and fund-raising consulting firm.

Please note that the views of authors do not always reflect the views of the AHA.



TRUSTEE TAKEAWAYS

- Though virtual board meeting attendance has increased, encourage more robust engagement through advance planning and savvy facilitation skills.
- Provide technical support to board members before and during meetings to maximize their participation.
- Be creative and have some fun! Serving on a board, especially now, is hard work. Enjoyable, efficient meetings are one of the best ways to foster positive board engagement and advance the organization's goals.