



# Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

## How to Have an Effective Board Meeting

By Anne Lowder

Once read (and saved) a Dilbert cartoon in which several people sat around a table at a meeting and the chairperson said, “There is no specific agenda for the meeting. As usual, we’ll just make unrelated emotional statements about things that bother us...”

That pretty much sums it up. Too many meetings are unstructured, uninspiring, and unproductive. This article is aimed at achieving a productive board meeting. It will give you tips for helping to structure board work and engage your board members.

### Where to start?

The foundation for an effective board meeting is an effective board. The National Rural Transit Assistant Program (NRTAP) resource titled Boards that Perform examines 10 steps to creating an effective board. We’ll focus on a few of them here.

The first step is to refer to your mission statement—your agency’s lighthouse. If you lose track of why or what you are doing at board meetings, look back to your mission statement to be reminded of your overall purpose. The mission statement is there to inform employees, customers, (and you) of what your agency is all about and where it is headed.

### Effectiveness comes with leadership

Leadership requires planning, preparation, and trust. A board facilitator must delegate responsibility and must be able to trust board members to live up to the responsibilities they have accepted. To build that trust, leadership also requires evaluation, education, and inspiration. The board must be committed to the agency’s mission statement and strategic plan. Board members should be given written job descriptions that reflect the duties that are expected of them.

Conduct an annual board review to determine if everyone is on track. The review should focus on both: 1) how well the board member and 2) how well the chair or facilitator is maintaining the mission statement and the goals and objectives set for that time-period.

Help your board to participate. Do this by educating your board members. Provide informational packets linked with

agendas that will help answer key questions. Help board members keep up with the rapid pace of change in the transit field and in your agency. Often board packets include reports from the board’s committees.

### Who does what?

**Executive director.** The executive director’s responsibility is to run the daily operations of the agency. The realm of the executive directors’ authority (not the board) is the operations of the agency, i.e., hiring or firing of personnel, budget needs and other operational tasks. Decisions made by the executive director, though, should be guided and constrained by board-approved policies.

The executive director also typically provides administrative support to the board. For example, board meeting agendas and board packets are usually developed by the executive director with input from the board chair and committee chairs. Other board support is usually in the form of drafting board correspondence, sending out meeting reminders, securing a location for the meeting, obtaining and distributing information for the board from staff or committee members, and assisting new members with their board responsibilities.

**Board of directors.** Board members typically have a general understanding of their roles and responsibilities. However, some are confused about their responsibilities concerning day-to-day operations. As a result, the line between management and the board can be blurred.

The role and responsibilities of the board must be clearly defined and understood by those who fulfill them. Upon entering board service, and ideally before accepting a board appointment, all members should be provided a written job description that clearly delineates their roles and responsibilities.

**Committees.** A committee’s responsibility is to research and make recommendations to the board. Transit committees might include finance, personnel, marketing and planning, operations, external affairs, and safety and security. These subject areas can be combined, added, or eliminated as needed by the agency.

Consider committees as an opportunity avenue to tap into community resources. For instances, if you have a finance subcommittee, look to people in your community with that expertise—exceptional fund raisers, accountants, or financial consultants—and make them part of the committee. They do not need to be members of your board. Another committee might focus on advocacy for public transportation. In that case, tap into members of organizations or individuals that use your services. The bottom line: Committees bring added expertise to your board activities and help you to obtain broader community support.

### It's meeting time

The main activities of the board are conducted during its meetings. How can you be sure those meetings are productive? The answer is planning, preparation, and thoughtful leadership. In saying that, I have been the chair of several committees and the best piece of advice I received was from a prior chair: "Make an agenda and stick to it!" An example of a poorly planned meeting is producing an agenda 30 minutes before the meeting. Why? No buy-in from the participants and confusion and lack of focus from an unprepared board.

**Set a firm agenda.** The Executive Director should work ahead of time with the board chair and committee chairs to request items for the meeting agenda and how much time they would like to discuss them. Agendas should also include items that occur annually, like discussion of new board members, a board self-evaluation and the yearly review of the executive director. Agendas still need flexibility, but this will work as a tool to allow individuals to think about what they want to accomplish during the meeting. Send out the agenda ahead of time (at least two weeks) to allow board members to know what to expect to discuss and how much time to set aside to prepare for the meeting.

**Committee reports.** The advantage of having committees

## Board Member Responsibilities

- Attend board meetings and other important board-related meetings (e.g., committee meetings).
- Prepare well for all meetings; read minutes and reports.
- Understand and support the mission of the organization.
- Understand the board's role in the agency (as opposed to the executive director's and staff's) and stay within the board's areas of responsibility.
- Follow the organization's bylaws and policies.
- Vote on major policies and major actions (e.g., major financial issues, personnel policies and procedures, marketing and planning, operation policies and maintenance, safety and security policies).
- Be willing to participate in committees.
- Hire the Executive Director and conduct an annual performance evaluation.
- Participate in periodic self-evaluations of the board.



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is that during the board meeting you do not have to get bogged down lengthy discussion of important details. The longer and more detailed discussions are held in committee meetings with the best expertise at the table. The committees then report recommendations to the board for discussion and approval. Having committee reports during a board meeting helps to create structure to keep your meeting tightly focused.

**Assign a note-taker.** Do this before the meeting starts, and make sure the note-taker has some guidance about the level of detail to include in the notes. After the meeting, when attendees are trying to remember what decisions were made and what actions need to be taken, they can simply review the notes.

**Discourage internal politics; use data.** "He said – she said," is not productive in a meeting. Are you discussing a complaint about the agency? Ask about the actual number of complaints on this topic and how they were responded to. Keep to the facts in your discussions.

**Stick to the clock.** The board chair or designee needs to

### Sources

- National Rural Transit Assistant Program (NRTAP). Boards That Perform. (2002). <http://portal.nationalrtap.org/iframe/resourcedetail.aspx?id=172>
- Federal Transit Administration, Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) Report 85: Public Transit Board Governance Guidebook. (2002). [http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/tcrp/tcrp\\_rpt\\_85.pdf](http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/tcrp/tcrp_rpt_85.pdf)

keep track of the time and keep items to the time periods printed on the agenda. This will help make your meeting successful and the chair will gain respect from everyone attending. (Remember, their time is important.)

In summary, an effective board meeting starts with planning and preparation. Use your mission statement to guide your agenda. Understand and stay within the roles and responsibilities of the executive director (day-to-day operations), board members (policy and fiduciary responsibility) and committee members (expertise, research and recommendations). It is also important to periodically review your management and governance processes. Finally, the key to a successful board meeting is a carefully-planned agenda (and sticking to it). Planning a well-thought-out agenda takes some work and skill, but with good planning, preparation and leadership, successful board meetings can be the building blocks for success to your agency. ●

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