

Organizational Culture and Practice of the Board: *Creating Access and Success for all*

Introduce the Exercise

- This exercise focuses on how to make your board and board meetings accessible to a broader range of stakeholders.

Pre-Exercise

- Your organization should begin by surveying individuals who represent the types of people you would like to engage in your board in order to identify obstacles and potential solutions.
- Prep butcher paper for each topic and title for these 'stations' based on issues already identified by the survey.
- Context statements and proposals offered at each station require preparation by a planning committee to reflect current issues.

Exercise

- Explain that the survey process identified obstacles and potential solutions for making the board more accessible. During this exercise we will see how much consensus there is around the proposals for how to address these issues of accessibility.
- Remind people this is not a decision-making exercise but a way to get reactions to the proposals, see where there is consensus or not, and to brainstorm better solutions.
- Divide into small groups (same number of groups as there are stations).
- Hand out pens and red/yellow/green post-its or colored index cards/paper with tape to each small group.

Instructions to the Small Groups: 5 minutes at each station

- Take 1-2 minutes at each station to read and then silently write out your own individual comments:
 - Red post-it indicates = that you really don't agree with the proposal and why.
 - Yellow is for concerns or something that needs improvement;
 - Green means a something that you really agree with or thinks is working well.
- Small group reviews comments from prior groups, then place their own comments and discuss. Facilitator calls out time to move to the next station.

Guiding Questions for Small Groups (leader reminds the group)

- What is the context – what are pros/cons of current practice on this issue?
- Does this proposal meet the needs?
- Are there other strategies to improve “accessibility” in these areas?
- What is your strongest concern/priority for this area to be most successful?

Tips to the group:

- Avoid repeating the same ideas.
- Try to come up with new strategies, or deepen the comments on the notes already there. Limit conversation on consensus items/“no-brainers”.
- If there are points you strongly agree with add checkmarks or !!! marks.

Reconvene as Large Group

- Once each group has had a chance to visit each station, the facilitator should reconvene the large group and recap results.
- Highlight those stations where there are a lot of greens and yellows that indicate consensus. These can be used by the E.D. and board chair to finalize proposals.
- Stations with a lot of red comments should be discussed by the full group to see if new solutions have been identified or consensus can be reached with a bit more discussion. Those more controversial items can be referred back to the planning committee for more problem-solving before final decisions.

SAMPLE PROPOSALS TO MAKE THE BOARD MORE ACCESSIBLE

STATION A: Practical/Logistical Issues #1

Food, Childcare, Transportation

- Context: If we want people with children and lower-income people to be able to participate we need to make the meetings easier to attend.
- Proposal: “The board budget should include funds for a light meal, childcare and bus stipends for each meeting.”

STATION B: Practical/Logistical Issues #2

Time, Place, Length of Meetings, Frequency of Meetings

- Context: The surveys said we have too many meetings and not enough people attend so they lose the continuity from meeting to meeting and we end up repeating discussions.
- Proposal: “Board meetings should be every other month for 3 hours including meal and rotate between 2 offices. Board agendas and packets should be distributed at least a week ahead of time. Board members who miss many meetings should be asked to join a committee instead of the full board.”

STATION C: Navigating and Understanding

Assumptions and Terminology, Structure of Meetings, Decisionmaking

- Context: Board agendas are really packed and only folks who know the background can participate in the discussions.
- Proposal: “Board presentations should use simple non-jargony wording, and plenty of time to understand complex items (like financial reports). Pros and cons of proposals and history of the issue should be presented to make it easier for new people to grasp the options. Study sessions or committee meetings would be useful on complicated issues.”

STATION D: Creating Multicultural Access

Language/Interpretation, Multicultural Awareness (Multicultural to be understood broadly including literacy, disabled access), etc

- Context: Our members speak many different languages: we should arrange translation of packets and simultaneous translation in the 2 most common other languages.”
- Proposal: “We should pay for translation for all board meetings and public meetings. Board and staff trainings should include regular discussions around building bridges across difference.”

STATION E: Connecting and Preparing

Orientation, Mentors/Buddies, Social Space

- Context: New board members say it takes a long time to get up to speed and they often don’t speak up on certain issues that are harder to grasp but let other who seem to know about the item make the decision.
- Proposal: “New board members should get a thorough orientation within first month on the board, and be assigned a board buddy who checks-in with them. Get-to-know-you social time should be included at least 3 times per year so new members don’t feel excluded from the ‘old-guard’ and to make board gatherings more fun.”

Source: Prepared by Margi Clarke and Emily Goldfarb 2007. Similar version used with Bernal Heights Neighborhood Center, San Francisco, at a board-staff retreat as part of a broader strategic planning process.