



How to Focus Your Board Meetings on Strategy

Have you ever sat in a board meeting that drifted off topic? If so, you are definitely (and painfully) not alone! Board members are supposed to focus on strategic issues, but sometimes their comments wander off like kitties in a kitchen. Here are steps you can take to focus your board meetings on strategy:

1. Before the meeting, the board president lists five possible topics for discussion and frames them as questions. The president's items must be strategic. Example: "Shall we expand our services to Canada?" rather than: "Which crayons should we use to draw our spaghetti dinner poster?"



2. Board members respond, before or at the meeting, by selecting up to three of those items for discussion. Call these topics the Golden Triangle. In this manner, the board members buy into the list and prepare themselves mentally to emphasize those topics at the meeting. Board members may not be unanimous in their choices, so the president serves as tie-breaker in finalizing the three strategic questions that comprise that night's Golden Triangle.
3. At the meeting, the secretary posts the Golden Triangle for all to see. (In this way, now both the president and secretary are allied in the pursuit of strategy.) If the board strays, the discussion leader can gesture at the list of questions to nudge the conversation back from crayons to Canada.
4. At the meeting, the board designates one board member to serve as that evening's Cat Herder. The Cat Herder has the board's permission to instantly interrupt a straying speaker, scold the speaker, and refocus the group on the Golden Triangle. If a board member continues to dwell on crayon colors, the Cat Herder has the board's permission to call for a vote to dismiss the errant board member.



Could this be one of your board members?

5. At a designated time in the meeting, such as $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through, the secretary interrupts the discussion to summarize any decisions made by this point in relation to the Golden Triangle. If it's clear the group hasn't made any decisions by now, a sense of urgency prevails, and the group either tightens its focus and drives toward a vote on each strategic topic, or agrees to further explore a given topic in some other time and place.
6. If time remains, the board may entertain any additional strategic questions that were of lower priority but that would still be worthwhile to cover.
7. At the end of the meeting, the president leads an informal tally on how well it completed the Golden Triangle, and the Cat Herder has the last word. If the group is happy with its performance, everyone gets to go home. If it is not, everyone must stay ten more minutes and perform whatever administrative task the executive director prescribes.

If you like this approach, talk to a few influential people on your board about your desire to use it. The idea may take some adjustment from others, so cultivate support for it before you propose it to the whole board. If others see that this is a lighthearted yet effective way to steer the board, use it at several consecutive meetings, and enjoy the results! (And please [let me know](#) how your experience goes!)

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