



Association of
Independent
Museums



The AIM
Hallmarks
of Prospering Museums

AIM Guides for Boards

More Effective Meetings: engaging trustees and building a strong team

Authors: Anne Murch and Gaby Porter

Introduction

A great board is a strong team of people, who when they meet:

- build time to anticipate and address a longer term future, the challenges and opportunities
- ask the right questions, listen keenly and respect different views
- encourage creative risk taking and entrepreneurialism
- work well together as a team, exercising collective responsibility
- do not interfere in detail.

We need to attract and retain people of the right calibre, who are interested and effective as a team. Yet the format and cycle of our board meetings may focus on standing agendas and routines that do not engage board members. Here, we introduce approaches that enable you to generate powerful decisions and far reaching results in your meetings and conversations.

These approaches are part of - the Thinking Environment, developed by Nancy Kline:

The quality of everything we do depends on the quality of the thinking we do first. The quality of our thinking depends on the way we treat each other while we are thinking.¹

In the Thinking Environment, we focus on enhancing how people think, rather than what people do. Creating the conditions and culture in which everyone is encouraged to think well for themselves, as themselves, helps to drive creativity and effective collaboration within all meetings, including at Board level.

Guidelines for Meetings include suggestions which will improve any meeting, while the **Meeting Framework** offers a whole new approach to your meetings.

1. Nancy Kline, www.timetothink.com



Guidelines for meetings

1. As Chair, meet the CEO before the meeting to plan ahead, set priorities and draft an agenda:

- What is the main purpose of the meeting?
- What items are the most important for discussion or have immediate deadlines for action/decision? What is the question you need to address for each item, to focus on the desired outcome from discussing that item? Put these items at the top of the agenda in the form of questions.
- What items can be grouped under the same heading?
- What could be dealt with elsewhere/ in other ways (short report, email update..)?
- What items need further preparation before putting them on an agenda?
- What time is needed for each item and allow extra time at the end.
- If papers are sent in advance, introduce each with a question to focus the Board's thinking. Circulate these at least a week in advance. Do not expect Board members to make a considered response to items which are tabled at the meeting.

2. Ensure that the meeting environment is comfortable and uncluttered. Keep the table free of mobiles and other electronic devices.

3. Start and finish meetings on time. Do not interrupt a discussion or back track to accommodate late-comers.

4. If the meeting is planned for more than 2.5 hours, create comfort breaks every 75 minutes. Stop the practice of getting up during discussion. Unless it is a special meeting (e.g. Away Day), ask yourself why do meetings need to take more than 2-2.5 hours?

5. Revisit the four principles of meetings in a thinking environment regularly during the meeting (right).

Meetings in a Thinking Environment

These four principles or 'components' of the Thinking Environment create the conditions for people to think together in meetings and to generate the best outcomes²:

Attention:

Listening to each other with palpable respect and genuine interest; and without interruption.

The quality of your attention profoundly affects the quality of other people's thinking. As the Thinker, knowing you will not be interrupted frees you truly to think for yourself. In return for not being interrupted, you agree to make your contributions succinct.

Equality:

Treating each other as thinking peers; giving equal turns and attention; observing agreements and boundaries.

In a Thinking Environment everyone is valued equally as a thinker. Everyone gets a turn to think out loud and a turn to give attention to others. To know you will get your turn to speak makes your attention more genuine; and makes your speaking more succinct. We do this by regularly going round and asking each person to explore the question.

Appreciation:

Practising a 5:1 ratio of appreciation to challenge.

The human mind works best in the presence of appreciation.

Incisive questions:

Removing assumptions that limit our ability to think for ourselves clearly and creatively.

2. The full components are at: www.timetothink.com/thinking-environment/the-ten-components/

A Meeting Framework³

By introducing these principles at the start of a Board meeting, the Chair promotes helpful meeting behaviours and is able to challenge openly any that are unproductive, such as interrupting others or being verbose.

1. The Chair welcomes everyone; offers an appreciation of the group; and states the purpose of the meeting. He/ she describes the principles – ‘how we will work together today’.

2. Opening round

Going systematically around the group, the Chair asks people, in turn, to respond to a positive question, for example:

What do you think we (the organisation, the board) are currently doing well?

This matters because it puts people in a positive frame of mind – which in itself raises the level of thinking – and engages people immediately. Research has shown that if we speak within 6 minutes of the start of a meeting, we arrive fully and contribute more thinking. Rounds demonstrate that, regardless of power differentials, everyone’s thinking matters because this produces the best results.

3. First agenda item – ALWAYS in the form of a question

The Chair introduces the **first agenda item**.

- **Short Presentation**, if appropriate, to set context or to inform the discussion. The Chair reminds others to hold questions and comments until the presentation has ended.

The Presenter says what question(s) he/she will address and restates the discussion question.

- **Clarification Round:**

Going systematically around the table, the Chair asks everyone whether they are clear about the question which the Presenter is posing. The Chair makes sure this round does not turn into a discussion.

- **Round on the Agenda Item Question**

The Chair then asks this question, going systematically around everyone in the meeting, and only allows open discussion after everyone has had a turn.

Completed rounds have a generative effect on ideas. When it is not your turn, give your full attention to the person speaking. Do not comment on what someone is saying during a round.

- **Open Discussion Round:** the Chair ensures that people are not interrupted when they are speaking. In discussion, remember to keep your eyes on the person speaking and to give them your attention.

- **Round on refreshed question**

(constructed by the Chair considering ‘what is the question now?’).

- **Discussion** (with no interruption) (and so on).

- **Decision, action, next steps**

At a certain point, the Chair asks:

Are we ready to summarise what we have decided?

And, if needed:

Please say that in fewer words so we can record it.

The group then makes decisions and agrees actions, with no interruption.

The Chair asks for a volunteer or minute taker to write on the flip chart or to note the key points so that she/ he can give full attention to the people in the meeting.

4. Repeat for each agenda question

As above. Use this approach for each item that requires a discussion from the board.

5. Burning issues round – towards the end of the meeting

The Chair asks each person in turn:

Is there a burning issue that you think we should address at another time?

3. Adapted from Transforming Meetings, an application of the Thinking Environment.

6. Closing round - Appreciation

As any concerns will have been raised at this point, the closing round can be wholly positive and reflective, for example:

What do you think went well in this meeting?

Additional elements

The following can also be introduced:

Thinking Pairs

The group breaks into pairs for each person to think for a few minutes without interruption (for example, 3 minutes each way). As before, the Thinking Pairs explore a focused question, to bring fresh thinking to this.

Removing assumptions

At any stage in the meeting, anyone can ask themselves or the group questions to identify and remove assumptions:

What is the most important question that we should be considering now to enable us to reach a decision?

About the authors:

Anne Murch and Gaby Porter are independent consultants working with museums, heritage and cultural organisations and partnerships to strengthen governance, leadership and purposeful action.

www.annemurch.co.uk and
www.gabyporter.co.uk

Association of Independent Museums (AIM)

3 Chestnut Grove, Ludlow
Shropshire SY8 1TJ
www.aim-museums.co.uk

Copyright © 2018 Association of Independent Museums and Anne Murch/Gaby Porter