

Changing the conversation: The Governing Simply board agenda template

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Association boards must change the shape and content of today's conversations if they are going to successfully anticipate the challenges and opportunities facing their organizations in the years ahead. By designing meeting agendas that wisely manage the time, attention and energy of their members, association boards can create a stronger context for effective decision-making. This template offers a different approach you can apply in designing in your board's next meeting agenda.

Morning agenda items—exploring strategic issues (3.5 hours)

Too often, strategic conversations are pushed to the end of board meetings, when in fact they should be conducted early in meetings when board members have greater energy to engage. Morning agenda items should be grouped into three categories and discussed in the following order:

- **Initial dialogue**—Discussion of global trends and industry/professional issues to enrich subsequent board conversations and to surface items for on-going exploration and possible future action.

Item example: The board discusses the long-term impact of negative economic trends on the industry and the association and concludes that it should be tracking certain key marketplace indicators more closely.

- **Patient action**—Discussion of items around which the board may take action going forward, but which may need to evolve or require additional inquiry or staff work before a final decision can be made.

Item example: The association's CEO asks the board to discuss a draft budget for the coming fiscal year and provide guidance on investment levels for new initiatives.

- **Dissent agenda**—Discussion of difficult or controversial items around which there is disagreement within the board with the goal of productively exploring divergent opinions and arriving at a shared agreement around appropriate next steps.

Item example: The association is considering a membership dues increase, and some board members believe that it is the wrong time to pursue that step.

Afternoon agenda items—taking action (3 hours)

By taking up action items in the afternoon, boards can re-engage the interest of their members and avoid "the post-lunch lull." Moreover, since board members often choose to leave meetings early, scheduling action items for the afternoon can be a useful approach in keeping them present and involved for the entire day.

- **Decisive action**—Action on items that have been thoroughly investigated by staff, and fully discussed within the board. Items in this category have nowhere else to go. A board decision is the final step; further deferrals are not warranted.

Item example: The association's finished budget or a fully vetted staff proposal for a new association activity.

- **Consent agenda**—Action on administrative and non-controversial items.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Board members wishing to remove items from the consent agenda can request they be added to the dissent agenda prior to the start of the board meeting.

Jeff De Cagna is chief strategist and founder of Principled Innovation LLC, located in Reston, Virginia. Jeff can be reached at jeff@principledinnovation.com. You are invited to use this e-mail address to share your feedback on this board agenda template, as well as to pose your questions on other 21st century association leadership issues and challenges!