You’re on Mute - How the shift from in-person to virtual board meetings impacts board governance & communication

Theresa Hurley
NPA 622: Nonprofit Data Analysis - Capstone
Spring 2021
Instructor: Marco Tavanti, Ph.D.
OVERVIEW

My research examines the impact of the move from in-person to virtual board meetings on board governance and board communication and dynamics.

Personal interest from what I observed with my organization’s board. What have others experienced?

We are one year in - what does the future look like?
The pandemic has caused the biggest transformation in governance in a century.

- Bob Harris
OBJECTIVES

To discover the benefits and challenges in board governance and communication that nonprofit association boards have experienced because of the unanticipated shift to virtual board meetings.

Create best practice recommendations for nonprofit boards that conduct virtual and/or hybrid board meetings.

Meeting modality should not affect a board’s ability to govern an organization.
METHODS AND APPROACHES

11 expert interviews conducted
- Nonprofit association ED/CEO’s
- Nonprofit governance consultants
- Association management staff
- Nonprofit law attorney

- 32-question survey for nonprofit association ED/CEO’s and board members was created.
- 145 responses were received.
DATA ANALYSIS - Expert Interview Findings

Governance benefits of virtual board meetings
- Allowed boards to continue to meet, more effective than telephonic meetings
- Increased attendance, ability for experts, guest speakers to attend, more voices heard
- Technology tools for deeper democracy
- Better understanding of governing documents

Board communication/dynamics in virtual board meetings
- Lack of non-verbal communication, inability to see body language
- Lack of engagement, being ‘in community’
- Bad behavior from loss of trust
- Humanizing effect of seeing people at home, with family/pets

Governance challenges of virtual board meetings
- Chilled deliberations - potential for groupthink
- Less strategic discussion, more operational focus
- Distractions - internal and external
- Ineffective board chair

Future of board meetings
- Needed reset to consider what is most important
- Creating the ‘Next’ normal
- Intentional meeting planning
- Variety of meeting modalities
DATA ANALYSIS - Survey Demographics

Survey Respondent's Board Role
- Board member other than Board President: 25%
- Other: 1%
- Board President: 10%
- ED/CEO: 64%

Survey Respondent's Board Size
- 10-19: 50%
- 20-40: 20%
- 41+: 14%
- > 10: 16%
DATA ANALYSIS - Survey

Pre-Covid Meeting Type (choose all that apply)

- In Person meetings: 138
- Telephonic: 19
- Virtual: 6
- Other: 1

Pre-Covid Use of Virtual Meeting Platforms

- Very frequently: 5
- Frequently: 8
- Occasionally: 27
- Rarely: 57
- Never: 48

72% of respondents
DATA ANALYSIS - Survey

Board meeting structure changed in virtual environment

- Completely: 6
- Significantly: 14
- Moderately: 42
- Very little: 69
- Not at all: 13

Voting Method Used in Virtual Meetings

- Poll or other electronic method: 16
- Raising hands (virtual or real): 45
- Voice: 69
- Multiple methods: 10
- Other (please state): 4
DATA ANALYSIS - Survey

Communication effectiveness in virtual board meetings compared to in-person board meetings

- Much better: 7
- Somewhat better: 21
- About the same: 61
- Somewhat worse: 51
- Much worse: 5

Quality of decision making in virtual board meetings compared to in-person board meetings

- Much better: 5
- Somewhat better: 12
- About the same: 102
- Somewhat worse: 23
- Much worse: 3
DATA ANALYSIS - Survey

Board Meetings in a Virtual Environment

- Governance Improved
- Communication Improved
- More Efficient

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Governance Improved</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Improved</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Efficient</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Benefits of virtual board meetings

- Increased attendance
- Cost & time savings
- Improved communication
- Shorter, more efficient meetings

Challenges of virtual board meetings

- Loss of social connection
- Relationship challenges
- Decreased overall discussion
- Decreased quality and depth of discussion
- Less strategic work
- Onboarding new members

‘To the extent that virtual attendance improved, the governance is improved. However, when a virtual meeting is over - that’s it. The in-person meetings… left room for lingering issues, burning questions and general debriefing…a precious time to learn more, grapple with different personalities, brainstorm, etc.’
It is imperative for association boards to learn from this last year and drive looking through the windshield, not the rearview mirror.

- Mary Byers
IMPLICATIONS

Strategy

Governance

Communication

Relationships

Why
- Outcome needed
- Purpose of meeting

What
- Gather/convey info
- Discuss
- Approve/vote

Who
- Staff/committee chairs
- Experts
- Clients/members
- Community

When
- Urgent - asap
- Regular - monthly/quarterly
- Special topic - not urgent

Where
- In Person
- Virtual
- Telephonic
- Email

How
- Pre-work needed
- Social time/ice breakers
- Active engagement
- Hearing all voices, respectful discussion
- Ensuring accountability, commitment to decisions
- Feedback
RECOMMENDATIONS

STRATEGY
- Strategic meeting design
- Meeting pre-work
- Thoughtfulness over speed
- Board chair leadership

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
- Work collectively
- Active engagement via technology
- Social time
- Soliciting feedback
REFERENCES


You’re On Mute:
How the Move from In-Person to Virtual Board Meetings Affects Board Governance and Communication
Theresa Hurley, MNA - Master of Nonprofit Administration - Capstone Project

Summary
Nonprofit association boards have seen changes in both board governance and board communication because of the shift from in-person meetings to virtual meetings. Some of these changes are beneficial and others are detrimental to the effective functioning of these nonprofits. It will be important for nonprofits to thoughtfully consider best board practices moving forward.

Purpose
To understand how the move from in-person to virtual board meetings has impacted nonprofit association boards. Create a model to assist boards in effectively running virtual and/or hybrid board meetings to ensure they can better serve their organizations.

Research
How has the shift from in-person to virtual board meetings affected board governance and communication?

Methods
- 11 Expert Interviews
- 32 Question Survey to Nonprofit Association Executive Director/CEO’s and Board Members (145 responses)

Data and Analysis

Results
- The pandemic has caused the biggest transformation in governance in a century.
- Communication challenges in virtual leading to decreased in-depth discussion.
- Combination of virtual and in-person meetings in future.. Hybrid meetings will require another adjustment.
- Boards must be strategic and thoughtful when designing board meeting agendas.

Recommendations
1. Strategic design of meeting including agenda, format, timing, interactions.
2. Board chair leadership is critical - set the tone and ensure everyone feels heard.
3. Utilize technology to ensure active engagement.
4. Social time is even more important in a virtual environment.

References