



Are your board meetings downright boring? If so, you're not alone. Many companies, both public and private, are having trouble stirring up board engagement. Ian Brenner offers some ideas on how to approach your board members to get the most out of them—and it starts with engaging them on a holistic and at a human level.

Congratulations, you've crafted the ideal board—be it a more formal board for a public company, or an informal advisory board for a private one. You spent months interviewing the candidates, diligently screening them, closing the deal, and yet—despite all that legwork—your interactions with your board are anything but productive. In fact, they're downright boring.

Let's paint the picture: board members are discreetly scanning their phones rather than listening to your well-rehearsed PowerPoint presentation. You open the floor to solicit input and you get blank stares—not exactly what you were hoping for when you engaged this group of skilled and experienced individuals to guide your company through times of prosperity and crisis.

Before you throw in the towel, however, consider this: It's not them. It's the process.

While the scenario above may be an extreme representation of a traditional board meeting, the times—as you're likely aware—are changing. Recognizing that what worked in the past no longer works in today's business environment, a growing number of organizations are doing away with traditional board formats in favour of more engagement-focused models.

What does that look like? It means taking the monotony and one-way communications out of the equation, it means exposing them to the vibrant corporate culture you've spent years building, and it means getting to know your board beyond the boardroom—as humans. If done properly, you might just see a boost in both board engagement and effectiveness.

While this new breed of board is still evolving—here are a few tactics you may want to consider if you’re hoping to get most out of your board.

Experiment with the fundamentals

Boards traditionally meet four times a year, but is that frequent enough to provide them with a clear view of how your company works? In a similar vein, when they do attend meetings, they’re often subjected to long—and well-rehearsed—presentations rich with data but short on insight. Is that the best way to provide a holistic perspective of the organization and a view of what’s truly happening deep within the culture of your company? The answer to both those questions is: probably not.

Before board members feel engaged—and comfortable making decisions and giving feedback—they should understand your company beyond a superficial level. Part of this involves establishing a meeting schedule that will allow them to see the bigger picture—with clear agendas, opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback, and well-defined expectations. But it also involves trying out different tactics to see what works best.

At [Netflix](#), for instance, the organization sends out a 30-page board memo in advance of its meetings. The online memo, written in narrative form, provides all the information members need in advance of the meeting, with links to supporting analysis. It also provides open access to all necessary data and information on the company’s internal system, and room for directors to inject questions into the document.

By finding more effective ways to convey the big picture, and tweaking the fundamentals, you may just be able to win board member buy-in and get that dialogue flowing more openly.

Expose the board to company culture

To provide valuable feedback and insight, board members need to understand how your company operates—something they can’t really learn in a boardroom. That’s why an increasing number of organizations are inviting board members into their operations to see management and staff in their natural habitat.

There are countless ways to offer this authentic corporate experience. One way is to invite board members to simply observe different, regularly-scheduled meetings—either larger, employee-wide gatherings, or smaller meetings at all levels. Alternatively, you may want to invite them to a company event, where they can connect with all levels of the company at once and observe the overall culture or meet key clients and stakeholders.

However you choose to introduce the board to your company’s culture, the goal should ultimately be to help them understand the management team and its relationship to employees and gain a realistic understanding of the company’s

day-to-day activities.

Get to know your board members as people

While it may come as a surprise, board members are people too. To be engaged, they need to feel a connection to the company—and the people that comprise it.

To cultivate this type of relationship, some organizations are inviting guest speakers into their board meetings—for instance, one company invited its young, high-potential staff to make short pitches regarding the various initiatives they were working on, while others brought clients in to [provide live testimonials](#). Other companies are looking at ways to make board meetings less lecture-like and more interactive. Cambia Health Solutions, for example, brought the board “[half-baked](#)” ideas, asking members to help flesh them out. This made the board members feel valued, which dramatically improved engagement.

Look at the world differently

Obviously, these strategies are just suggestions—and they may not work for every company. That said, they point towards a larger lesson to keep in mind. You get to decide what impact—if any—your board has on your company. To get more out of it, and leverage all it has to offer, sometimes you need to think differently—and this starts with engaging your board members on a holistic and at a human level.

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