

Building a Better Board Agenda



How to
improve
agendas to
assist boards
in meeting
21st century
challenges

By Rande Loucks

Early in the spring of 2001, OLTA and SOLS joined together to present a series of orientation workshops for library boards. One of the topics considered was library board agendas. The topic appeared again at the 2002 Super Conference session dealing with a 21st century agenda for boards. Representatives from a number of boards at these workshop sessions discussed how board meeting agendas might be improved to assist boards in meeting 21st century challenges.

One of the key discussion points at the session was the board's involvement in creating the agenda. An agenda is a plan to facilitate a meeting – a roadmap or guide. It is a simple tool comprised of a list of business items to be considered. It is also important to realize that the agenda is a tool for the board to do its job. Because it is only the entire board that has the authority to act, not individual board members, the board meeting is the major opportunity for the board to do its work.

Although the agenda belongs to the board, it is frequent practice for the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to create the board meeting agenda. It is true that the CEO is most likely to be consistent from board to board, and part of the CEO's job is to provide support for the board. Nevertheless, the board chair should play the major role in developing the agenda, using the CEO's valuable advice to create a workable meeting plan that enables the board and staff work.

Many library board agendas have a tendency to pull board members into day-to-day activities. These agendas allot too much time to items that could be better dealt with quickly. Substituting a Correspondence Summary for complete copies of all correspondence saves board time as well as trees. One copy of correspondence can be available should the board need to refer to it. Approving plans and reports attracts Boards in library operations more deeply than necessary. Board members may be unsure of what ques-



tions they should ask before approving a financial report unless there is a board member with specific expertise in finance. The result is often that board members are tempted to ask picayune questions that relate more to staff jobs than to their own.

Agendas should give board members a clear idea of how to prepare for the meeting. An annotated agenda will provide information not just about the item to be discussed, but also what materials board members should read prior to the meeting or bring with them. A good

agenda will also include an estimate of how long board members might expect to spend on particular items.

Agendas Should Move the Board Forward

The Board's work is largely strategic and directed towards the future. Meeting agendas need to move the board forward. Because the agenda is often prepared just in time to get the board package into the mail, the monthly agenda may not be enough to keep the momentum going. There needs to be a

plan to move board work from month to month. Creating an annual agenda is a useful way to ensure that the board has the time to accomplish all the necessary tasks over the course of the year. In fact, it should lead the board throughout its three-year term, enabling it to handle both the expected and unexpected business of library governance.

Ideally, the annual agenda should reflect the current goals and objectives the board is seeking to achieve as part of its strategic plan. Relating the annual agenda directly to the results the board is seeking to achieve focuses board work on the future and on moving ahead, but also provides a means of tracking and evaluating its progress in meeting community needs.

Ken Haycock's Challenge to Library Boards

In an exciting video conference broadcast in several Ontario communities in April 2002, Ken Haycock told library boards that they were in the community development business. He challenged them to make a difference in their communities. This challenge places the board's key relationships with municipal council and the community in the forefront. Building a board agenda that emphasizes these relationships is critical.

Council members regularly sit on library boards as trustees along with citizen representatives, so there is a natural connection with council. Municipal council is the library board's most important partner in community development. Boards need to nurture this relationship ensuring that library and council agendas are aligned and communication flows easily back and forth.

Boards need to reach out more to their communities to gather information that will help them make better decisions about policy and strategic direction. Delegations are commonly featured on library board agendas. Unfortunately, these are often feared encounters where the board hears from disgruntled patrons about problems. There are many other reasons for a board to meet with the community. Library boards may meet with other local boards who are also engaged in

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community development to share information about common elements of their missions. Boards may seek contact with other groups in the community simply to build a relationship or to provide education about library activities and goals or to strengthen the library's identity within the community. Some of these meetings may result in partnership projects or, depending on the nature of the contact, a sponsorship of a program or facility.

The library board will also report to the community at large, the council and the province for the purpose of accountability.

This type of work requires a wide variety of activities, events and business that must be accomplished over the course of a year. The wise board will plan for these at the beginning of the year, so that time during meetings is used effectively. For an example of how an annual agenda might be used to plan such activities, see *Trustee Tips* #22 "Connecting With Your Community," at www.library.on.ca. Click on *Southern Ontario Library Service*, then on *Trustee Development* and on *Trustee Tips*.

The concept of an annual agenda will help the board to spend its time effectively and develop strong community relationships. Use your agenda as a communication tool with your community by publishing it along with minutes, annual reports and financial statements.

The Final Year of a Board Term

January 2003 will mark the beginning of the final year of this board term. Boards should direct new energy to council and community relationships. Two major activities are important during the final year of a board term. The first is that the board should discuss how it can have an impact on the recruitment process of new board members. OLTA has created a new Recruitment Brochure designed to assist municipal councils during the appointment process. The brochures are available from OLTA now so that boards can plan well in advance of recruitment deadlines.


The second important issue to consider in the final year of the term is

what concerns should be addressed by the new board. This may be communicated in a legacy document from the retiring board. Such a document can outline accomplishments and challenges for the new board to bear in mind. The retiring board may also wish to share information about how it has carried out its job as well as new information about the community and its needs.

Library boards play a lead role in serving community needs and creating a more vibrant community in which to

live, work and play. Building an agenda that draws the board's attention to its relationships will help the board to recognize community needs, and demonstrate the value of the public library in the life of the entire community. ■

Randee Loucks is Manager of Trustee Development for SOLS and acts as an advisor on governance processes to the SOLS board. Randee has also worked with the Ontario Library Trustees Association (OLTA) and prepared the revised edition of *The Ontario Library Trustees' Handbook*.

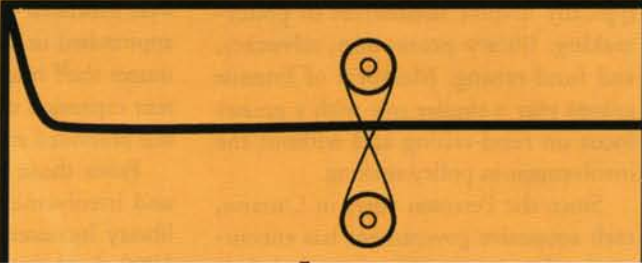


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