

If Board Meetings Don't Change You, You're Doing It Wrong



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: Governance

Last week I found myself engrossed in my first read of a new year: *The Power of Giving Away Power*. Author Matthew Barzun offers a compelling, fresh look at a concept I've come to understand as servant leadership: recognizing that being someone's boss is a privilege that affords the opportunity to influence others' lives positively.

I've also been knee-deep in report drafting and creating briefing slides for consulting and speaking engagement clients who seek guidance to position their boards as effective Risk Oversight bodies. As I peruse board packets, committee charters, and past presentations, I'm struck by the traps that ensnare well-intentioned staff leaders preparing for the inevitable, upcoming board meeting. These traps include:

- The busyness of board agendas filled with 'updates' and 'status reports,' leaving scant time to talk about critical risks and worries for which there is no clear, safe path forward.
- The use of dashboards filled with mostly green icons intended to signal the board that 'everything is under control!'
- The tension between the need to disclose brewing trouble and the worry about raising an alarm or conveying that "we're not sure quite what to do."

The overwhelming message many board agendas convey is that the outcomes have been pre-determined. We know who will say what, we've anticipated your questions, and we want you to sit back and acquiesce. The unfortunate, unspoken subliminal messages include: "please log in, so we have a quorum, but keep your comments minimal so we can stay on pace with our busy agenda!" An excellent practice I see more frequently is the post-board meeting 'pulse' survey. From my vantage point, these surveys should consist of a single question: "Was today's meeting an excellent use of your time?" Or "Are you feeling grateful that you gave up 6 hours of your day to attend today's meeting?"

Barzun writes about the work of management guru Mary Parker Follett, whose insights on leadership stood the test of time and inspired many better-known gurus. Follett was an early prophet of co-creation, the idea that fruitful gatherings happen when people create them together. Was your last board meeting reflective of the goal of co-creation? Or a highly scripted briefing where staff and board member performers did and said what they were instructed or coached to do or say? If a single member of your board is likely to answer "No" to my

pulse survey question, change your board meetings this year by adopting 3 expectations inspired by the work of Mary Parker Follett:

1. **Expect to need others.** Invite board members to gather with the intention to embrace difference and diversity to make something *together*. If you're a CEO, stop thinking of board meetings as a chance to reassure the board that everything is in hand. Look into the eyes and bios of the brilliant, passionate people you have cajoled into board service; they want to learn and contribute. Resolve to find ways to make both happen at board meetings.
2. **Expect to be needed.** Bring your whole self to the meeting, putting other tasks and activities aside. Silence your phone. Close your email inbox. Come ready to pose and respond to hard questions from your gut instincts, unique perspective, and passion for the nonprofit's mission. Believe that others will hear you, seek to understand you, and accept your perspectives in an atmosphere of trust.
3. **Expect to be changed.** Bring your true self and instinctual truths to the conversation. But follow Follett's lead by allowing your truth to be changed and affected by the insights of others gathered around the actual or virtual table. Embrace Adam Grant's cautionary reminder that "We listen to views that make us feel good, instead of ideas that make us think hard." When a fellow board member says something with which you disagree, pause and reflect instead of striking back. What did I miss? What did I just hear and possibly learn? How could this change my views on this subject?

Barzun says Follett's framework requires that we "expect to leave a meeting not quite the same person as when you entered." Have you had that experience as a nonprofit executive or board member? I can recall how it felt when I experienced a powerful 'a-ha' moment at a board meeting. When the newest and youngest member of the board was the last to share her view on an imminent decision, her contrary view led us to hold off on voting to make sure we clearly understood her perspective. That unplanned 30-minute delay was the most powerful, memorable part of the entire weekend-long meeting.

The bottom line of Follett's approach—expressed beautifully by Matthew Barzun in *The Power of Giving Away Power*—is that gatherings should be fertile ground for co-creation. When committed, passionate people gather to tackle the business of nonprofit governance, each person should leave that gathering with new insights, feeling changed, energized, and determined to return to conquer the next challenge and celebrate the next mission win. Your nonprofit's mission deserves nothing less.

Melanie Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions and stories about recharging board meetings and striving for co-creation at your organization at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.