



Practical Tips for Better Hybrid Board Meetings

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As COVID-19 swept across the country in 2020, most hospital and health system boards began conducting virtual or hybrid board meetings. The latter refers to a meeting in which some members attend in person and others join virtually. For both models, most organizations kept the board's agenda and presentation materials basically the same, and "success" was defined as all board members being able to hear (and ideally clearly see) presentations and to participate in discussions and for the board to be able to act when required.

In mid-2021, several factors are keeping many boards in a hybrid mode: the continuing regional pandemic surges, the preference of some board members for its convenience, and the reality that retired members located in northern states have enjoyed the benefits of attending virtually while spending winters in a warmer climate.

Now that board members have become comfortable with the technology, what can be done to move hybrid board meetings from "good" to "great"?

Some of the Basics Remain the Same

A colleague and I wrote an article entitled "Practical Tips for Better Board Meetings" for the October 2019 issue of *BoardRoom Press*.¹ This advice still is relevant for enhancing today's hybrid meetings, with tips #4 and #5 being especially important:

1. Less can be more—consider moving to six board meetings per year.
2. Use an annual board work plan/calendar.
3. Prepare, prepare, and then prepare some more.
4. Don't let reporting crowd out strategic discussions.

1 Marian Jennings and Jennifer Swartz, "Practical Tips for Better Board Meetings," *BoardRoom Press*, The Governance Institute, October 2019.

5. Plan your work (the agenda), then work your plan (ensure the board chair is effectively managing meeting time).
6. Make sure the board's background materials are useful.
7. Use a board-member compact to guide behavior.
8. Use the expertise and talents of governance support professionals.

Moving Hybrid Meetings from Good to Great

Building on the basics outlined above for effective board meetings, we recommend that governance support professionals consider both “process” and “logistical” improvements to organizing and conducting your hybrid board meetings.

Seven Tips for Process Improvements

While you may be tempted to replicate in your hybrid meetings what has been successful for your in-person meetings, resist this temptation! Instead, view this time as an opportunity to think creatively about changes to your board agenda and meeting materials. Ensuring active board engagement is different when the board is not gathered. Think of it this way: when hospitals implement new information technologies, experts recommend that “you should not just convert how and what you did,” but instead redesign your processes to capitalize on the new technologies. The same is true for a hybrid board meeting, including the following:

- **Engage the board in developing the norms and expectations for a hybrid meeting.** Many will be similar to those outlined in a board-member compact, but may be expanded to address such questions as: Should remote participants be expected to keep their cameras on (yes!)? Is it acceptable to eat a meal during the meeting? What dress is expected? Can individuals participate while traveling in a car? Is it acceptable that someone near the remote board member could hear meeting discussions? These and other behavioral norms that are unnecessary to articulate for fully in-person sessions should be addressed. It is better to set the ground rules in advance.
- **Re-evaluate and redesign the board meeting agenda as necessary.** In addition to making sure reporting doesn't crowd out strategic discussions (tip #4 above), break the ice at the outset of a hybrid meeting to make it clear that active participation from all is desired and expected. For example, rather than starting with the consent agenda and committee reports, consider launching the meeting with a strategic discussion related to finance, quality, innovation/growth, the physician enterprise, workforce/staff engagement, population health, or another

topic critical to future success. Provide “pre-meeting thought questions” in the board packet and ask that everyone come prepared with two or three thoughts to get the conversation started.

- **Be realistic in understanding that, when hybrid, you may require more time to review or discuss an issue.** Remote participants may need content to be repeated or clarified simply because they are not in the room. This likely will require that your agenda content be reduced/streamlined so it can comfortably fit within your scheduled meeting duration.
- Naturally, the board chair is the key to a successful hybrid meeting. **The board chair needs to play an even greater-than-usual role in soliciting input/feedback and actively encouraging dialogue, while simultaneously moving the meeting along.** Throughout the meeting, the chair should deliberately solicit opinions from those participating remotely, especially the introverts. Chairing a hybrid meeting requires more energy and intentionality to address important issues while keeping the meeting moving. If your chair agrees, governance support can play a key role by serving as a timekeeper, respectfully reminding the chair and all participants that it is time to move on.
- **Simplify presentations:** fewer words, more punchlines. While your board packet will still include detailed financial, quality, or other information, management should create slides that could be read in the boardroom from 15 feet away. As included in tip #5 above, you should assume that everyone comes to the meeting prepared. Do not waste time and strain board members’ eyes by reviewing all the detail at the meeting. Instead, assume “everyone can read” and come ready for discussion; use the presentation to frame that discussion, not to be a crutch for the unprepared.
- **Make sure that, in your governance support role, you actively monitor the body (facial) language of remote participants and ensure that the chair is aware if someone is trying to participate in the discussion.** Similarly, be alert for virtual participants who seem disengaged from the discussion; sometimes a simple private chat message saying, “we would love to hear from you” can encourage them to participate. (Of course, they need to know how to chat in your platform.)
- **Devote five minutes at the end of the hybrid board meeting for the chair to conduct a process check,** asking, “what went well at today’s meeting?” and “what should we consider doing differently next time?” This can yield continuous board meeting process improvement.

Five Tips for Logistical Improvements

- **Select the best possible conferencing platform.** Value is defined as quality relative to cost. Selecting the lowest-cost option is likely not to provide you with the highest-value platform. There are great differences among the many virtual conferencing platforms available. Selecting the right platform is crucial to hybrid meeting effectiveness. You want and need a platform that makes it easy for both the presenter and participant to see all attendees when a presentation is being shared; allows for private and group chatting; permits the chair or governance support professional to know “who is next” with a comment or question; and allows for polling to obtain input on topics being discussed or votes being taken. Once a platform is selected, if you change platforms or when a new member joins the board, test it with each board member who may be attending virtually to make sure he/she has had all logistical questions answered and will be able to join the meeting easily and utilize its features.
- **Learn the ins and outs of your conferencing platform.** Many platforms include features that can facilitate a board meeting or retreat. Take the time to explore your platform’s features and think creatively about how they could be used. For instance, some platforms offer a handy feature that lets you easily and seamlessly move from a full group to subgroups and back. This is an especially helpful feature for board retreats. I recently remotely facilitated a board retreat of over 100 people, during which we moved from a full group to small groups to reports to the full group; the platform made this smooth and participants loved the experience.
- **Invest in a great camera for the boardroom** that can show the whole room at once and has the capacity to “turn to whomever is speaking.” Many of these cameras include a microphone so that virtual participants can both see who is speaking and hear comments easily.
- **Ensure that remote board members have a computer or tablet that is up to the task.** They should be able to clearly see presentation content and other participants. Discourage members from calling in to the meeting, since it makes their seeing other board members, management, or any presentations problematic.
- **Require that all virtual participants keep their cameras on for the entire meeting** (this should be one of the norms/expectations agreed upon at the outset by the board). And make sure that their camera is positioned so that others can see their well-lit faces front and center, perhaps by encouraging the use of a webcam.

Conclusion

Hybrid board meetings are likely to stay. Ensuring that such meetings are not just a “necessary but lesser” substitute for in-person meetings will be critical to your board’s ability to fulfill its fiduciary duties and responsibilities. The board and governance support should view this as a learning experience and an opportunity to be creative in designing what may well become the mode moving forward.

The Governance Institute thanks Marian C. Jennings, M.B.A., President, M. Jennings Consulting, and Governance Institute Advisor, for contributing this article. She can be reached at mjennings@mjenningsconsulting.com.

