

The Action Agenda

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The Action Agenda is a valuable tool in meeting management. It is based by design on prioritized division of agenda items. It assumes the following:

- **most important organizational business first**
- **least important business will be done last**
- **each agenda item will have a named person as sponsor to present it**
- **each agenda item will have a pre-assigned time limit that can be adjusted up or down**
- **participation by all board or trustee members will be required by use of round-robin techniques that allow each person to comment or pass**

These practices allow an organization to stay strategically focused and make better use of the time available for meetings. The structure is as follows:

Pre-meeting:

It is reasonable to permit some very basic presentations to occur before the corporate meeting is convened officially. These should be brief, on a time limit for each item and not subject to in-depth discussion. Items presented here might include:

**Strategic Plan Update Presentation
Business Plan Presentation
Meeting Management Presentation**

Agenda:

Meeting startup activities – Only a few written reports may be presented for approval before getting into action items for decisions to be made. These are:

**Financial Report and Approval – Balance Sheet and Profit/Loss Statement
Minutes of the Corporation – Submitted for approval as written or amended**

Action items - These require definite decisions to be made during the meeting. They should command the most time and should be in order from most important to least important. Encouraging board members to have motions written out in advance can mitigate the time consuming process of framing a new motion during the meeting. Including the motion in the printed agenda gives each participant the same information to use. A summary of the rationale for each motion might also be in the printed agenda.

Discussion items - These agenda items might involve a motion or decision but may result in any decision being held over for a future meeting. A brief topic or theme can be stated in the agenda for each item. A motion may be made at any point in the discussion by a participant. At the end of the time allowed for the item discussion ceases or the group must approve an extension of the time limit by consensus.

Information items - These should be very written presentations of information without any discussion. By organizing these in a meeting manual, they can be read by participants before or after the meeting and kept for reference.

Time control in this entire process is critical. The chairperson or president must set limits on discussion of even the most controversial issues to ensure that a timely decision is made. Asking people to not repeat the points made by others is helpful. If you agree with someone else's comments it is easy to say just that, "I agree with comments by . . ." The chair should appoint a timekeeper who can keep the process on schedule. This might be a vice-president, parliamentarian, or other executive committee member who is very familiar with the rules of order and action agenda process.

Setting a finish time for the meeting and sticking to it is also critical in this agenda. The group learns that everyone will leave at the announced time, and they become participants in holding discussion down to salient points. Those items that do not get covered will simply be deferred to the next meeting. That is the reason for all items being in a priority order and for written informational reports being made available out without explanation.

One important matter when using the Action Agenda is to reorganize item placement at the beginning of the meeting. That can be done by asking, "Do we have a motion for certain for each Action Item?" Or you can ask, "Are any of our discussion items really just reports?" Moving agenda items at the beginning can be very time saving, especially if you have a particularly long agenda for the meeting.

Controversial issues can often be held to a specific time allotment by asking that each board member hold comments

to 2 minutes and then take comments on a round robin basis, allowing members to pass on the first go-round, if unready to comment. The second round for those who passed will usually allow each board member to have input. It also keeps the aggressive members, who often dominate commentary from overwhelming others with repetitious remarks.

The Action Agenda can radically reduce meeting time for organizations that meet infrequently. Quarterly board meetings that may have taken 24 hours in the past, can easily be reduced to four or five concentrated hours of meeting. This allows boards or governance groups that fly or travel into a meeting from great distances to organize some time for socializing, strategic planning, and board training. The meeting format is not conducive to many of these other activities. It is often valuable to do planning in a different location than a business meeting. This gets people out of the meeting mindset when you are doing creative planning activities.

Organizational meetings are not the only venue improved by Action Agendas. The weekly staff meeting of an organization can also be made more concise through this process. Having a one hour meeting each week that ends on time is much less frustrating and maintains a high quality communications environment in the organization. Hold the meeting even if key members are out of town to allow everyone to continue to communicate about weekly business.

The Action Agenda does not resolve all meeting problems but with a little practice it will place you on a better track for greater efficiency. Doing first things first is always the right way to do business. The “Old Business – New Business” paradigm often leads to long boring meetings that never address the strategic needs of an organization.

This action agenda process has evolved in practice by the National Association for Interpretation. It was originally introduced to me by the League of Women Voters in Pueblo, Colorado, who used this method of meeting management.