



Insights for volunteer board members

The Dos and Don'ts of Consent Agendas

Highly functional boards know that board time is a precious commodity that shouldn't be squandered. A tool that many boards utilize to make their meetings more efficient and productive is a consent agenda—also called a consent calendar.

The consent agenda groups perfunctory, but nonetheless important, items into one agenda item, speeding up the meeting and creating time for more critical issues and previously undiscussed matters. It can either be included as part of the regular agenda or as its own separate agenda. Either way, it is approved in one action and by one vote by the board, rather than requiring motions to be filed on each individual item.

What goes on a consent agenda? The items are typically routine and non-controversial, or matters the board has achieved consensus on after previous discussion. Generally, topics that have not been discussed by the board in the past should not be put on the consent agenda. The board chair prepares the consent agenda, usually in consultation with the executive director. Consent agenda items typically include:

- Committee and previous board meeting minutes;
- Office or committee reports;
- Routine correspondence that require no action;
- Minor changes in a policy or procedure (e.g., for purposes of clarity or to update without changing intent or meaning);
- Routine policy revisions (e.g., changes in dates or dollar amounts due to changes in laws);
- Updating documents, such as minutes, reports or role descriptions;
- Standard contracts that are used regularly (e.g., confirmation of using the traditional in-house contract with a new vendor);
- Confirmation of conventional actions that are required in the bylaws (e.g., signatory authority for a bank account or acceptance of gifts);
- Final approval of proposals or reports that have been fully discussed and vetted at past meetings;
- Reports provided for information only.

At the meeting, the board chair should first ask members if they wish to move any consent agenda items to the regular agenda for further discussion. This is essential as members should be able to make such a request for any reason. If requested, the board chair would move the item and open it up for discussion during the regular agenda, or make it a "parking lot" item for future debate. Ideally, board members should ask for such a move before the meeting so it can be placed on the regular agenda before the meeting starts. After any items have been moved and the consent agenda is set, the board chair recites the items on the consent agenda and moves to adopt it.

Transparency and accountability are the foundations of successfully employing consent agendas. Even though they are routine and non-controversial items, it is imperative that all supporting documents be provided and that board members fully review them in advance. Failing to provide them can lead to mistrust. It's also worth noting that items on the consent agenda are still important and deserve board members' full attention—otherwise, they shouldn't be on the agenda at all.

Boards that effectively use a consent agenda will find that meetings are more productive, members are more engaged, and more time is available for strategic issues that require more debate and deliberation.

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