

Respectful Meetings

Build Your Organization's Effectiveness

We give our time to organizations that are doing work we care about, whether it is a particular part of the agriculture sector or our child's hockey team. At times that passion can make us lose sight of how we treat others in the organization, especially when their opinions differ from our own.

Ideally we strive to treat our fellow board members with respect, but sometimes our actions can communicate otherwise. Spending time on building respect around the board room table will ultimately increase efficiencies.

Respectful meetings

Meetings in particular can bring out strong opinions. The following is a list of ways in which we can ensure meetings are respectful.

1. **Make sure you come on time.** Not wasting others' time is a way to communicate respect.
2. **Arrive prepared** having read any pre-meeting material and with any documents needed in hand. Others should not have to spend their time getting you up to speed.
3. **Respect the ground rules** that the organization has established for meetings.
4. **Make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak.** When we are passionate about something, it can be hard to keep quiet, but it is important for everyone around the table to have a chance to express their opinion. Practice active listening to hear everyone's opinions.
5. **Keep an open mind to others' opinions.** Just as you want the opportunity to speak

your mind freely, others want to be afforded the same courtesy.

6. **Ask for clarification** or more information if necessary. Be curious and interested in what others have to say.
7. **Keep the conversation focused** on the issue at hand and not on individuals. This minimizes potential conflict.
8. **Reveal potential conflict of interest** situations and accept the board's decision about your involvement on that issue.
9. **Discuss issues** at the meeting and avoid the "meeting after the meeting". Generally parking lot discussions revolve around things one is not comfortable bringing up at the board table and this can be damaging to the work of the board.

Beyond meetings, it may be helpful to talk about the culture within your organization. Are practices in place to cultivate respect within your organization? Here are a few things to consider:

- When someone visits the organization, either in the office or at a board meeting, what sense do they have about the organization? Is it positive, comfortable and respectful? How do outsiders view your organization?
- Does each person in the organization believe they can add value? It's not necessary that everyone compete for the chairperson post, but each person should participate and contribute to the work of the organization.

- Is it possible for board members to keep the greater good in mind as they discuss things that are contentious? Do you remind yourselves about the goals and purpose of the organization so that you remember everyone is ultimately united?
- Does your organization encourage regular communication between members, even outside of board meetings? How are you staying connected? Build in time for casual interaction to strengthen the ability of board members to work together for the cause of the organization.
- Is your organization flexible when it comes to the demands placed on board members? Weather and other demands of the farm operation can quickly thwart plans so it is important for the organization to be flexible in its approach.
- Do board members have an opportunity to think about their own contributions to the organization?
- Is teamwork encouraged? Is there recognition that together, things can be accomplished more effectively?
- Does your organization encourage its members to disagree and effectively resolve conflict? Do your members listen and provide feedback to each other? Is criticism constructive? What is done about hidden agendas? Are they kept in the background or talked about frankly?
- Are individuals recognized for their contributions, especially those who volunteer their time on the board? Do people work together and are they willing to help each other out to accomplish the organization's goals?

Code of conduct

Consider developing a code of conduct (sometimes called a code of behaviour) to reinforce the respect your board wants to promote among members. Any written code is only as good as actions that stem from it. This may become increasingly important – some experts believe the level of civility in our culture is decreasing and respectful behaviour once considered normal is becoming the exception.

The following needs to be considered and encouraged in developing and applying a code of conduct:

1. Consult with your board members. What is considered acceptable behaviour?
2. Create a list that is posted, introduced to new or prospective board members and reinforced. Affirm behaviour that follows the code; confront behaviour inconsistent with the code.
3. Ensure leaders (both paid and unpaid) model this behaviour.
4. Communicate this often, in a variety of formats.

A simple code of conduct could look like this:

- We are honest in our communications.
- We respect the individual differences of members of our organization.
- We foster innovative problem solving and creativity.
- We celebrate our successes and share our failures.
- We act with integrity in all our dealings.
- Each member carries our share of the workload.
- We talk about problems and deal with problems promptly.

Adapted from Skills Program for Management Volunteers, Effective Organizations: A Consultant's Resource, Judy Kent, 1992

For more information

- Go to manitoba.ca/agriculture and click on Industry Leadership
- Email us at leadership@gov.mb.ca
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