

Winter 2016
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Favored Statements at Board Meetings

By Bob Harris, CAE

I have sat through enough board meetings to distinguish the feeble phrases from the more powerful statements.

For example, an association distributes committee and staff reports two weeks in advance through a board portal or Dropbox. But not everyone reads the reports. You recognize these directors as they begin statements with the phrase, “I just have a question.”

Unfortunately what follows their question are well-intentioned directors who are quick to offer answers. The meeting is redirected from advancing the agenda to answering a variety of questions.

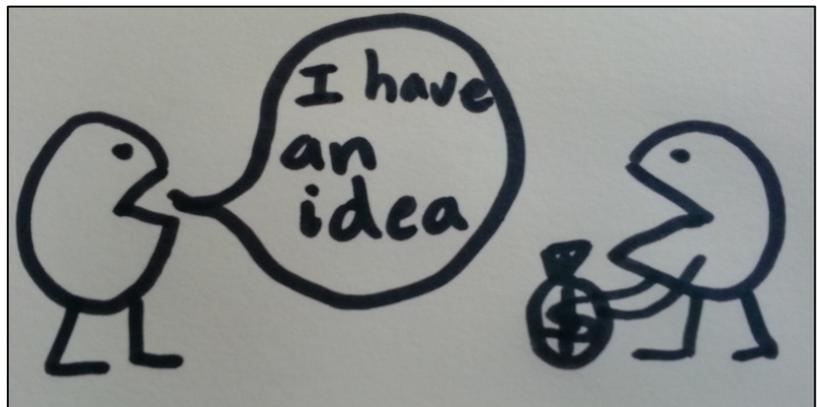
Board phrases can be divided into those that should be banned and others that should be encouraged.

Discouraged

Forbidden phrases take the board down a “rabbit hole” or distract from the agenda.

We’ve Always Done It That Way – This is conversation killer. A seasoned director squashing an idea because of history. There may be new technology or resources to improve an idea or program if it isn’t squashed with, “We’ve always done....”

I Have an Idea – Beware of this phrase tossed on the board table. Some directors (and committees) seem to measure success by how many new ideas and projects they offer. Directors should be disciplined about determining if “ideas” fit within the budget, strategic plan and mission before they respond, “good idea.”



I'm Representing My Chapter – You might hear, “I know the issue has a statewide impact but I'm here representing my chapter.” Some directors have a tough time taking off their “chapter hat” and replacing it with a governance role that advances the parent organization.

I Didn't Know we Had a Strategic Plan – The first question incoming leaders should ask is, “do we have a strategic plan?” It serves as the roadmap for all actions of the board.

Should I Read the Bylaws? – The bylaws describe the relationship between the governing board and stakeholders or members. Directors must understand the bylaws to carry out their fiduciary duties.

I Just Have a Question – Beware of the director who sounds wise with, “I just have a question.” Don't let the eager respondents distract from the meeting agenda.

How Many Meetings am I Allowed to Miss? - The bylaws may indicate that action will be taken against a director who misses meetings. But these should not be considered “passes” to get out of meetings. The board is a team and it requires a quorum to act.

Encouraged

These statements should be encouraged to support high performing governance.

What Part of the Strategic Plan Does this Advance? – Nearly every discussion should be influenced by the strategic plan. Keep it on the table and encourage directors to consider how motions will advance the plan.

We're in the Weeds – When governance dives into tactics it can be said the board is “in the weeds.” Praise directors that point it out and encourage a return to more relevant conversations.

How Will We Measure Success? – A nonprofit organization runs like a business – even though it has tax exempt status. To run it effectively, consider performance measures as an aspect of every discussion.

Let's Take It Up to 50,000 Feet – Conversations may take dives into the realms of committee work and staff duties. Avoid those by getting the board back up to a visionary, long-term perspective – often described as 50,000 feet and above.

Can We Put that Idea in the Parking Lot? – Not every idea will fit in the current budget or strategic plan. For ideas with merit, suggest it be put in the “parking lot” for consideration when the timing and resources are right.

What’s Next? – The ideal closing question at meetings is, “What’s next?” This provides opportunity to improve understanding, clarify expectations and make assignments.

Be especially leery of the statements: “I just have a question” and “I have a good idea!” Directors should recognize these phrases and know how to redirect in order to stay on task.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, offers free association governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com