

CHMIN 760 Advanced Leadership
Book Reflection by Steven Poenitz
Making Meetings Work by John Tropman
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Agreement

I have read the book by John Tropman, *Making Meetings Work*. Relative to the topic of church board and committee meetings, this book has extensive help for my leadership cohort. The book format was not simple reading, but the author's attention to detail contributes to a wealth of reference material to educate leaders how to operate church, community, and family meetings.

Application

This book is definitely applicable material for a senior pastor—where the rubber meets the road. One of my greatest fears is not being prepared for a church board meeting or better yet, getting caught in a situation where harmony is destroyed because of lack of planning and preparation for a monthly church board meeting. Usually, the head elder and I go over the agenda in advance—sort of a pre-session planning for the meeting. I have chosen to delegate the leadership of our church board chairperson to our head elder. Our present head elder is a building contractor and land developer. Better yet, he is a valuable Christian leader. He knows how to separate business-world tactics from spiritual principles. He is blessed with a very discerning mind. He loves Jesus and has endeared himself to our elders and church members by a sweet character. His style of operation is open and vulnerable. There may be issues that are a “can of worms,” but he generally knows what is coming and is prepared to deal with potential conflicts on the church board.

As Tropman has so comprehensively written, conducting meetings is an art. Tropman's presentation of meeting masters actually gives this senior pastor cause to salivate as a leader, desperately and eagerly coveting the ability to master optimal conducting of committees such as a church board.

The pre-planning for a church board meeting is so crucial; especially, the area of developing the agenda. The chair and I generally meet at a restaurant to discuss the agenda. We look over the previous month's minutes to be sure of follow-through. That's what determines ultimate results. We have not yet elected to send out the agenda to the church board members in advance. This may be a mistake, but I have noticed from my pastoral predecessors and their administrative procedure of sending out the agendas in advance, that members tend to hardly notice their mail. Life for most active lay leadership is so busy that they only superficially read minutes or agendas, if at all (And what about the ecological overuse of paper! At this point my assistant/youth pastor and I are planning on using power point projection to avoid a blizzard of handouts to board members.). There are times, I must admit, when having the agenda in the minds of the board members in advance can be advantageous in order that critical thinking can already be "cooking" some solutions. There are extreme situations where the agenda item is so sensitive that it needs to be camouflaged before discussion.

Most board participants (especially the chair) disdain surprises regarding unexpected board items for discussion. However, Tropman recommends placing "blue sky items" (226) on the agenda for preliminary discussion. It is then understood that the next meeting will address items previously discussed for final decisions. Nevertheless,

monumental and history-making items need time for soaking and consideration before a decision is reached.

Formerly, our church board procedure included the keeping of a notebook for each of 25-30 church board members. The church secretary would prepare these notebooks for each monthly meeting. However, the secretary's preparation of these materials did not justify the limited amount of reference in the actual board meeting; because she expended extensive efforts in the process. A helpful alternative (which we have not instituted) would include several key officers of the board having notebook access during the meetings to former records at their fingertips. Sometimes, accessing a previous set of minutes during a church board meeting can be extremely helpful in clarification for a point being contested. More technology needs to be used in our church meetings than we presently use.

Tropman's discussion of 4 audience groups on boards/meetings was enlightening (67-71): observers, participants, one's self, and the minutes. This perspective of 4 audience groups was insightful for understanding the composition of a healthy board meeting. Occasionally, our church board does have the observer or special guest that comes to give a department-specific report. We encourage attendance at our open church board meetings by any church member, but voting privileges are limited to nominated church board members. The participants of the meeting are also included as part of the audience, due to their responsibilities that represent a specific department. Then, there's the self audience group. The dynamics of self (personality, emotions, and preferences) can be influential as an audience group. From John Dybdahl's class on spiritual formation I've concluded there is serious value in assessing and testing board members'

personalities and operational style. It is my intention to pursue this testing of future church board members as we begin the new calendar year. In conjunction with the board chair, I'd like to offer this option of testing to help us better understand one another as we interact on the board and know why certain board members respond as they do to issues.

It was also enlightening to understand that the minutes of a board meeting comprise the 4th audience group. Yes, for the future audience, minutes are extremely important. They are important in the way they are recorded too. We are blessed to have a secretary who identifies minutes by date and topic; so, access can be easily gained when reference is needed at a future moment.

There can be the accusation of "rubber stamping" decisions at a church board when things are so well prepared in advance (59). However, if agendas are developed through preliminary discussions at the previous church board meetings; there should be no argument of "rubber stamping."

One area that this pastor needs to hone and improve is communicating with lay leaders in advance regarding their department issues. This is an area where surprises can erupt, but advance communication with potential presenters alleviates this potential disaster area during a church board meeting (59).

Tropman discusses rehearsal of the meeting, even dress rehearsal of meetings. I like how he suggests that props and meeting arrangements should all be in order before the meeting. One challenge we face is having the finance committee in the same room just before the church board meeting. That precludes tweaking the room for the last few minutes before a board meeting. It also can hamstring consultations with various leaders prepared to give a report. Tropman's suggestion of visiting with early arrivals just before

the meeting is helpful, but won't work for us. I do find it helpful to discuss with department leaders in advance what they will be reporting about. This gives organization and preparedness to agenda items, provides for clarification of issues at the last minute, and allows a better grasp of a lay leader's position at the last moment.

Continuing with dress rehearsals, it is wise to have experimented with projection equipment before a meeting to avoid snafus that waste time. It helps to avoid unexpected glitches with technical equipment.

One area that irritates this pastor is when a department leader comes rushing in at the last moment begging to be placed up front on the agenda; so he or she can leave the meeting early. That smacks of selfishness and disinterest in the church's mission if this stunt is pulled too often. I understand that there will be emergencies.

We have not found young people as representatives on the church board to be very beneficial. It makes a nice window dressing, but the representatives we have selected usually are busy with school and night jobs; so, they often can't be present for a meeting. And, young people have generally not been experienced enough to want to speak up on issues. Furthermore, when difficult issues have arisen, the young people are the first ones that have found their faith tested—and have dropped out.

Speaking of meetings, there are many more than just church boards. We have a community service advisory board, church ministries committee, women's ministry council, deaconess board, deacons board, elders board, finance committee, church renovation committee, school board, ministry development committee, health council, etc. What I have learned about committees is they can burn out the participants if the same leaders are assigned to many committees. The church governance process can burn

out willing workers and executive leadership who are expected to be on every committee as key leaders.

What works best is to try and co-opt meetings for the same evening sequentially sometimes. That means we would have one meeting at 6:00 PM and then another at 7:30 PM. That avoids overloading pastors and key lay leaders with committees and keeping them running to church every night of the week. Another tactic is to tie in a meeting right after a church congregation service such as vespers or prayer meeting. We have planned an elders board prayer service for the families of our church right after prayer meeting, where we are praying through the directory of names of our church.

The area of family brings to light the challenge of meetings. Tropman has challenged the family in one of his last chapters to conduct regular and official meetings with agendas to discuss when each member is present. I actually haven't seen this done in families, but know that an option would be to conduct a family council or board right after family worship. There would need to be some experimentation in scheduling and gleaning of agenda items in advance from family members. I like the idea of having a simple post-it note type pad on the refrigerator. That provides easy access for communication and retention of items for the next family council.

Shifting to the American dream and discussion of "rugged individualism" (169) for a couple of lines, I'd like to highlight the challenge of pulling groups of individuals together for building consensus and harmony of a shared vision. Our society has isolated us to the point of separation from each other. When we do get together, there has not been much practice in harmonization and unity of group decisions. That's why aberrations like the Abilene Paradox occur over groupthink processes (204). Very little

effort has been expended in training and educating group decisions; so, individuals capitulate to group think decisions or blurt-out opinions that create an unraveling of the entire spirit of the board meeting. I think one of the greatest challenges from Tropman's book is to understand the mindset for good meetings: "What this mindset means is that change and improvement in meeting culture is truly an uphill battle" (200).