

BRANDING IN THE BOARD ROOM

A Utility Branding Network Tool

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Utility governance structures come in a variety of forms, including dedicated boards of directors or city councils. The members of these governing bodies, the people making the policy decisions, may be elected or appointed. Independent of the structure, the utility's staff is charged with facilitating a productive dialogue with the community about important policy issues, rates, and investment. This dialogue comes to head during public meetings where issues are discussed, and decisions are made. For the sake of simplicity, this tool refers to the elected or appointed officials as "board members," and the public meetings as "board meetings."



THE BRANDING CHALLENGE

Facilitating board meetings is a significant management and branding challenge. Adherence to meeting procedures, the quality of information shared, and the behavior of staff and board members have a significant impact on conflict and trust in the utility. Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for people to show up for a meeting because they have specific concerns, only to find themselves even more at odds with the utility due to the dynamics of the meeting. This is a serious problem, especially since a small group of vocal activists can influence policy decisions, investment, and future quality of life in the community. Regrettably, staff and board members are prone to blaming the public for their beliefs and the ensuing conflict, failing to fully appreciate the effect of their own information and behaviors. This point of view can be a barrier to improving the board-meeting experience.

Getting Comfortable with Conflict - People who attend board meetings are often opponents of planned policies or investments. So, managing these meetings is an exercise in conflict management. Not all conflict is bad. Rational disagreements over substantive issues can lead to better policy decisions and stronger community support. The utility's staff and board members should expect and be prepared for conflict. But they must also recognize the difference between productive disagreements and conflict that is created by poor information and behaviors, or substandard meeting procedures.

Understanding the Power of Standards - Standards are rules, levels of quality, or achievements considered acceptable or desirable. Standards are substantive, expressing motivations and value, which means they should be center stage when proposing an investment and discussing differences of opinion. For example, it's reasonable for two people to disagree about the number of acceptable odor events for a wastewater treatment plant and the cost of meeting a given standard. Unfortunately, standards are often buried deep in written materials, inferred, or not explicitly discussed. This lack of clarity can lead to tangential discussions, confusing debates, and unnecessary conflict. Focusing on standards encourages a substantive, civil, and transparent dialogue.

THE DESIRED BOARD MEETING EXPERIENCE


What people read, see, and hear during meetings influences their opinions about whether staff and board members are competent and trustworthy. Ideally, the board-meeting experience should cause attendees to come to the following conclusions:



- The utility is committed to being transparent and is harboring no hidden agendas
- It's easy to understand the utility's roles, standards, and value to the community
- The staff and board members adhere to meeting rules
- Proposed investments and policies are easy to grasp and compelling
- There is ample opportunity for public dialogue prior to decisions
- The staff and board members are listening and want to understand people's concerns
- The utility seriously considers public feedback when making policy decisions

People may not consciously come to all the conclusions noted above. However, the opposite perceptions do occur and are clearly damaging, for example people deciding that there is a hidden agenda or that the utility is not interested in their concerns. Utility managers should think of the conclusions above as desired meeting outcomes, providing the basis for the following recommendations.

CHECKLIST



Strong brands are transparent because customers experience the brand's intrinsic value. Likewise, the utility's staff and board members must engage in a substantive and transparent dialogue. They should also acknowledge that public support is not determined by a person's intellect or education, but deeply influenced by the quality of the utility's information and listening skills. The following checklist addresses procedures, information, and behaviors that will increase transparency and trust.

- ☑ **Avoid Long Meetings** – Board meetings that are long and arduous do not build trust. Construct agendas with a time limit in mind, and provide information that stimulates a meaningful and efficient dialogue.
- ☑ **Set a Context of Transparency** – Reinforce the utility's commitment to transparency by stating that the objective is to facilitate a substantive policy dialogue. This opening statement should refer to specific measures designed to increase transparency (for example the fact sheet and the compelling argument structure noted below).
- ☑ **Provide a Utility Fact Sheet** – A meaningful fact sheet is structured around the utility's high-level business values, for example reliability, efficiency, and financial performance. This structure provides a framework for listing more specific standards and sets the context for proposals and deliberations.
- ☑ **Follow the Meeting Rules** – Follow an even-handed and rules-centered process. This minimizes conflict and helps board members stay focused on public input. It's bad branding when a board member, or anyone else, is influencing the process.
- ☑ **Write Compelling Staff Reports** – Configure investment or policy proposals to ask and answer the relevant questions in advance. This structure should be explicit, highlighting standards, the problem and proposed solution, financial implications, timing concerns, and the consequences of failing to act. See the Utility Branding Network tool "Making a Compelling Argument for Investment."
- ☑ **Train Staff to Lead a Meaningful Dialogue** – The purpose of a compelling argument is not to create a debate, but to encourage a productive dialogue. When asked a question, staff members should clarify the facts or promise to follow-up. The focus should be on listening and understanding, not defending. Never infer that a board member or meeting attendee is wrong.
- ☑ **Keep Referring to Standards** – Ensure that policy deliberations stay on track by consistently bringing discussions back to the relevant standards. This approach highlights the substantive issues, shifting the dialogue away from beliefs, ideologies, and tangential walkabouts.
- ☑ **Listen to Understand, Not to Respond** – Assume people are intelligent and have legitimate concerns. Listen carefully, avoid interrupting, find out why they are concerned, and don't engage in a debate. Often, people just want to feel they have been heard.
- ☑ **Be Prepared for Meetings** – Board members should stay abreast of the issues and appear prepared for the meeting. It should be very clear they have reviewed the supporting materials prior to the meeting.
- ☑ **Be Courteous and Engaged** – Arriving late, being preoccupied with phones, or engaging in private conversations at the dais sends the message that you're not interested in public feedback. Be respectful to meeting attendees.
- ☑ **Explain Decisions and Votes of Abstention** – Board members should explain their thinking, especially when they decide to oppose a proposed policy or investment. This also applies to recusals. Abstaining without explaining why suggests there is a hidden agenda. "Explaining why" is a great way to model transparency.
- ☑ **Read a Preamble Before the Public Comment Period** – Explain the provisions outlined in speaker request forms, emphasizing the utility's commitment to follow-up on comments or questions. Encourage speakers to explain why they have concerns.
- ☑ **Design Speaker Forms to Stimulate Dialogue** – These forms should identify the issue or agenda item, capture the speaker's concerns, and encourage the speaker to describe why they have the noted concerns. Name and contact information are important for follow-up. Ideally, no one should be allowed to speak without this information. Transparency goes both ways.
- ☑ **Allow Ample Time for Dialogue** – This reinforces the idea that public comments can affect decisions. Most states have rules that guarantee sufficient time for discussion prior to a decision. Make sure these rules are being followed.
- ☑ **Engage Community Leaders** – Facilitating sound policy decisions is difficult when those who regularly attend board meetings have specific agendas. These agendas may not be aligned with broader public interests. Meeting attendees deserve to be heard, but they should not have undue influence. Create a more balanced dialogue by making sure a larger group of community leaders (the influential public) are systematically informed.
- ☑ **Continuously Improve** – This checklist assumes that the utility's standards and behaviors have a profound impact on trust and the utility's brand. They provide a framework for evaluating and enhancing the quality of board meetings. To improve, staff and board members must be willing to candidly assess current practices and proactively address problems.

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