

Managing boardroom squabbles online

Shaping the smart usage of online meeting chat features for sorting disputes is a work in progress

A leading banker was recently appointed as an independent chairman after his retirement from active service in the private sector. He had led a board before, but it was a challenge for him to manage things in the pandemic lockdown, virtually for the first time in his career. His first online meeting as chairman was a couple of months ago and he is still feeling uncomfortable about it all.

Many board leaders are in the same position, having to apply the skills they've learnt in leadership to a new remote 'boardroom' environment – while also wrestling with occasional tech hassles. Seasoned board chairs know the value of pre-meeting preparations. Running an online meeting kicks this need up a notch. What gives the highest success is preparation in advance. Then put some practice time on the video platform to get familiar with what buttons to press and how to do various tasks (showing presentations, going to chat, forming sub-groups, etc). Enlist someone from the IT department to help with this, and invest a few hours poking around and practising tasks on your own. Do also check how you look and come across on video.

Preparation also means checking and double-checking that all 'board book' info is updated and easily available to participants. Also, try exploiting the platform for advance tasks that save meeting time, like virtual consent resolutions and agendas, committee meeting minute approval, and polls or other queries. The more board work you can get underway (and the more questions you can answer) in advance, the better.

We've written in previous columns on the value of setting virtual meeting etiquette rules, but another benefit is that this makes your 'herding cats' job as an online chair much easier. Have a policy of one speaker at a time, and set rules for directors to let the chair know when they want to speak. Practise using the online chat function to give attendees a way to communicate directly with the chair, which eliminate everyone chiming in all at once. Realise also that the ability to split off digital sub-groups from the full board meeting is a great tool to help the chair manage better. Sending audit or compensation committee members to a digital breakout room for a few minutes during the meeting to hash out an issue can be a great time- and work-saver (a smart board chair knows how to delegate).

Helping the other online directors improve their presence makes your task easier as well. Try to convene the group a few minutes early for virtual



Dr M. MUNEER



RALPH WARD

catch-up and warm-up. Then send chat notes to members whose lighting, framing or audio may be poor (or their camera may be pointing up their nose). By the time you call the meeting to order, everyone will be at his or her best.

Now that a comfort level is attained, how do you deal with boardroom dissent online – especially when the board chair is also the CEO? Squabbles happen on strategic as well as tactical issues. Usually, disagreements are worked out before and after meetings in one-on-one discussions. In the current time, we have lost that personal chemistry, and the residual tensions in video meetings are palpable.

Virtual meetings tend to mask the interpersonal but this need not be a deal breaker for the use of online governance. Rather, boards and their leaders are developing alternatives that can function as well as traditional in-person governance (and sometimes even better).

The distance element of online governance weakens the power of boardroom loudmouths and bullies to dominate meetings. Online meetings are a great equaliser. Minorities and women get more empowered to speak up, and feel comfortable with an online buffer. If a couple of directors are squabbling, they have much less impact when they're just postage-stamp-sized images on a Zoom screen. This filtering also tends to level out board table power politics. Online meeting participants tend to get listened to more for the quality of their points than for their job titles, ownership or loudness.

Gaining these benefits for the cyber board requires a few new meeting skills. The chair has to be continuously looking for nonverbal cues. The role of smoothing out issues over a cup of coffee now happens through phone calls in the days before the meeting. Again, this requires less building of a *new* board leadership skill than just translating current good chairmanship into different media.

Online board tech like Convene can make the standard tactic of breaking out a handful of board members to work through an issue, practical. The work group can expedite things, return to the full meeting and the process is simple, with a few clicks. Board leaders are also becoming savvy with video-conference chat functions, not only for real-time side discussion, but also for subtly letting contentious directors know they need to play better together. Shaping the smart usage of online meeting chat features for sorting boardroom disputes is a work in progress, but is already proving to be invaluable. ♦

M. Muneer is MD, CustomerLab and co-founder, Medici Institute, a non-profit organisation. Ralph Ward is a global authority on boards; both of them drive board alignment for corporations. Contact: Muneer@mediciinstitute.org