

‘The cadence can be out of sync.’ The Right Agenda for Today’s Board Meeting



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ou know boardroom practices are in need of a revamp when Edward Norton gets involved.

Yes, we’re talking about the actor of *Fight Club* fame. But instead of fighting men in an underground club, Norton has set

his eyes on fighting (and fixing) broken board meetings—so much so that he’s cofounded a company that’s working to make board meetings more efficient and dynamic.

From our perspective, he’s got a point. Though it doesn’t get much attention in the outside world, companies go through some rather extensive preparation just for these meetings. Typically, two weeks in advance, entire management teams shift their attention to prepping materials—dozens of pages of information and PowerPoint presentations, not just for the full board meeting but for the committees, and sometimes subsidiary board meetings, too.

While that may not seem like a huge investment of time for one meeting, when boards gather at least quarterly these days, if not more often, that’s a good *two months* of an entire year that management spends on meeting prep, instead of on strategy or day-to-day operations.

Maybe a few decades ago, that could’ve worked just fine. But the pace of the business world has picked up dramatically in recent years, and even more so this year. Simply put, the cadence and prep of board meetings is out of sync with the uncertainty and speed of the age in which we live. With the kinds of headlines we see today, both in geopolitical affairs and financial shifts, top management can’t afford to take their eyes off of the target for extensive meeting prep. And neither can directors.

The agenda could use a little refreshing, too. It’s time for directors to really examine what needs to



be discussed and ensure they’re constantly refocusing and reducing what’s on their plate. Just because there are 10 routine topics on an agenda that have been in place since 1998 doesn’t mean that they actually need to be discussed, or that the board book needs to be hundreds of pages long. Frankly, many routine items can be a waste of people’s time—and their intellectual bandwidth, considering we have an average attention span of 8.25 seconds today (down from 12 seconds in 2000).

Above all, 2025 may be the year more boards consider tackling some of their work off-cycle. Committee meetings and routine matters can easily be handled in a virtual video meeting in the week before the in-person get-together. This will provide more time for the meaty issues that meeting time should be reserved for: analyzing business risks and opportunities, getting to know the management team more in depth, and digging into talent and succession planning.

We’re dealing with a world where markets drop suddenly, only to recover in a few days. A world where tariffs are announced, creating panic, only to be withdrawn. A world where cease-fires are started, then stopped. And all of that affects board meetings. We recently watched management and

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directors work diligently to prepare for board meetings on topics, like tariffs, that changed overnight. Clearly, much more fluidity and off-cycle updating is needed.

Of course, with that off-cycle work comes an uncomfortable reality that board directors need to face: Serving on a board in 2025 requires a lot more work than it did even five years ago. It calls for spending more time on fewer boards and using new AI tools to provide targeted assistance. Boards also need to be more educated—both collectively and individually—which requires directors to spend more time in continuous self-learning mode. And with this need comes increased accountability and monitoring, to ensure a member isn’t just learning, but also sharing what they’ve learned with the entire board. After all, one of the best ways to grow—and succeed—is to surround yourself with people who are smarter than you. ■

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