

Writing an effective Board Paper – Ten tips for success

By Mark Rosenberg

As a CEO or senior manager, writing an effective Board paper is a critical skill. An effective paper will enable you to get clear feedback and direction from the Board with a minimum of fuss so you can get on with doing your job. It will take the Board where you want them to go and leave them thinking what a great job you are doing.

In contrast, an ineffective paper may result in a long, frustrating meeting that will leave the Directors questioning your competence and will often result in the Board directing you to do exactly what you didn't want to do.

So how do you produce an effective paper? Here are ten tips.

1. Think like a Director

The starting point is to think like a Director. Put yourself in the shoes of a Director and ask what you would want in a Board paper? Most Directors are busy people. They want Board papers to be clear, concise and easy to read. Many will want attachments that will allow them to drill into the detail, but almost every Director will want the actual paper to be short, sharp and to the point.

Remember that Directors will be seeking to act in the best interest of the organisation and will in most instances be looking for a careful, low-risk approach to their decision making. It follows that submissions will generally need to be couched in these same terms - incremental, planned, logical, and with key milestones specified.

While the Directors will publically base their decisions on rational thinking, don't forget that they are human and have to be engaged at an emotional level if persuasion is to take place. Ask yourself what are Board and individual 'hot buttons' that have to be addressed? What is each Board member's relationship to the status quo? What political factors come into play? The challenge is to work out the best approach to sell your idea.

2. Clarify the key questions

Before you start writing, you need to sit down and clarify what are the key questions for consideration by the Board. Ask yourself what are the 3-4 critical questions the Board needs to answer in relation to this topic at this point in time.

3. Clarify what you want to say and what it is you want the Board to do

You need to think about what it is you actually want to say to the Board. What are the key messages you want to communicate on this subject? What is going to be the best way to make your point? Do you adopt the position of the solution provider, the petitioner, the questioner, or some other

stance? What information will you need to support your position? You also need to think about what it is you want the Board to do. They won't do what you don't ask them.

4. Canvas support

Don't make the mistake of thinking that a well written and argued Board paper will inevitably deliver the outcome you desire. Engaging with key stakeholders is a necessary part of preparing the paper. Take time to explore the issues with key influencers. This will include the Directors themselves and people who you know have significant influence on the Directors.

Directors don't like surprises. By canvassing and talking through the issues with key stakeholders before the meeting, you will get an understanding of what they see as being important and have the opportunity to educate and influence their thinking so that they will be more receptive to your position.

5. Make the paper easy to read

Make sure the paper title is clear and easily understood. The title should enable the Board to immediately get what the paper is all about. The nature of the paper should also be made clear. Is the paper for information, discussion or decision? A short overview spelling out exactly what the paper is about and what you want the Board to do is often useful. It is also useful to spell out what are the key questions the Board needs to consider up front. This will keep Directors focussed on the real issues and reduce the risk of them getting sidetracked.

Use headings to make it easy to understand what's going on. Write succinctly. Don't waffle. Short paragraphs are better than long paragraphs. Tables and graphs will often make it easier for the reader to digest complex information.

6. Spell out the options and the pros and cons

Directors like to understand what the options are. Make it easy for them by spelling them out. Go through each option and outline what you see the pros and cons to be. Identify the key decision making criteria and note how each option performs against that criteria. Use tables and charts if this helps communicate the position.

7. Anticipate questions

Always anticipate the sort of questions Directors are likely to ask. Imagine you are a Director reading the paper. What are some of the questions you would ask? Have you made any suggestions or comments that beg a question? If you have, make sure you amend the paper so you answer the question. Don't assume Directors will accept a suggestion that seems obvious to you. They will want you to provide the rationale for your position.

8. Share your views

In most instances, Directors want to know what the CEO's (or author's) view is. If you don't have a clear position and are looking for guidance from the Board, that's fine, just make sure you tell them that. If you do have a position, let them know what it is. Directors recognise that you will have spent

a great deal of time thinking about the issue and in most instances will respect your view so long as it is well presented and backed up by relevant explanation and facts.

9. Make the proposed actions easily understood

If you are seeking to have the Board agree to specific recommendations and action, make it easy for them to see what it is you are recommending. If there are a number of actions use a table. Spell out the action, by whom and by when. If there is a cost associated with the proposal, address the issue of how it will be funded.

10. Ensure the proposed resolution is clear and unambiguous

Finally, make sure you specify exactly what you want the Board to resolve. You want to walk out the room confident that you and the Board are crystal clear on what it is that will be done following the meeting.

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