

Multitasking In The Boardroom

Successful board meetings need undivided attention from every director. Do you or any of your directors multitask during your board meetings? Do any directors periodically check their smart phones for email or the latest news?

I honestly cannot recall a board meeting in the last several years when at least one director and sometimes even the CEO checked their smart phone several times during the meeting. The ubiquitous use of iPads has accelerated this trend. It's become increasingly difficult to keep everyone focused on board business.

Directors and CEOs face a major issue of information overload. Many boards are now using electronic file management rather than hardcopy to distribute their meeting materials. This certainly saves paper and reduces costs. However, one unintended consequence is that a director's iPad that has the latest company financial report also opens email and browser with one simple keystroke.

The Temptation

The temptation to have board information and email open simultaneously is too great for some to resist.

Multitasking directors demonstrate a lack of attention to company business. At worst, this borders on a breach of their fiduciary responsibility. At a minimum, it shows some level of disrespect for their fellow directors.

3 common reasons I've heard for multitasking are:

1. I have a very heavy workload in my full time job.
2. I'm bored with the board discussions.
3. I'm in the middle of a big deal and things are happening fast.

I'm sure that there are many more reasons to justify multitasking and I can understand when something important is happening back in the office. However, there are better ways to handle this conflicting demand on a director's time. I can't accept either of the first two reasons above. They are entirely within the control of every director.

Stop the Multitasking

I've seen several good ideas implemented to minimize and eliminate multitasking in the boardroom.

- Discuss this issue with your board and agree that all electronic devices are turned off during the board meeting.

- Build time into the schedule specifically for blackberry use, email and phone calls.
- Fine individuals for violating the no multitasking rule. This effectively highlights the issue in a lighter way but still effectively makes the point.
- Check your iPhone or BlackBerry at the door. It worked for Marshall Matt Dillon in Gunsmoke!

Direction Concentration Is Mandatory

Lack of complete concentration is unacceptable at board meetings. Multitasking issues need to be discussed by the full board and violations addressed tactfully by the board chair or lead director. Such behavior is disrespectful to the other directors and if sustained, may warrant the removal of that director. Are there multitasking issues you and your board need to address?