Favored Statements at Board Meetings
Bob Harris, CAE

After attending a few meetings directors will gain an ear for the more powerful statements at the table compared to feeble phrases.

When an agenda is distributed in advance, often with supporting documents and reports, directors must prepare by reading. You will recognize the directors who did not prepare by the frequent statement, “I just have a question.”

The statement triggers a barrage of well-intended responders who try to provide the answers. The meeting digresses to providing well intentioned answers --- leading to sidebar conversations.

Divide the board phrases into two groups: those to be encouraged and others that should be banned.

**DISCOURAGED**

Forbidden phrases take the board down a “rabbit hole” or distract from the agenda. An efficient meeting requires a focus on accomplishing the work set out on the agenda.

We’ve Always Done It That Way – This is conversation killer. A director squashing an idea because of history. There may be new technology, innovation or resources to improve an idea or program --- if it isn’t squashed with, “We’ve always done....”

I Have an Idea – Beware of this phrase tossed on the board table. Some directors (and committees) seem to measure success by how many new ideas and projects they offer. Directors should be disciplined about determining if “ideas” fit within the budget, strategic plan and mission before they respond, “good idea.”

I’m Representing My Chapter – You might hear, “I know the issue has a statewide impact but I’m here representing my chapter.” Some directors have a tough time taking off their “chapter hat” (or personal perspectives) and
replacing it with a governance role focused on *advancing the organization’s purpose and goals.*

**I Didn’t Know we Had a Strategic Plan** – The first question incoming leaders should ask is, “do we have a strategic plan?” It serves as the roadmap for all actions of the board.

**Should I Read the Bylaws?** – The bylaws describe the relationship between the governing board and stakeholders or members. Directors must understand the bylaws to carry out their fiduciary duties. Other documents to read include the policies (wisdom of prior boards) and articles of incorporation.

**How Many Meetings am I Allowed to Miss?** - The bylaws may indicate an excused absence is acceptable. These should not be considered “passes” to get out of meetings. The board is a team and it requires a quorum to act.

**ENCOURAGED**

These statements should be encouraged to support exemplary governance.

**What Part of the Strategic Plan Does this Advance?** – Nearly every discussion should be influenced by the strategic plan. Keep it on the table and encourage directors to consider how decisions will advance the plan.

**We’re in the Weeds!**
When governance dives into tactics it can be said the board is “in the weeds.” Empower directors to point it out and encourage a return to more relevant conversations.

**How Will We Measure Success?** – A nonprofit organization runs like a business – even though it has tax exempt status. To run it effectively, consider performance measures as an aspect of every discussion.

**Let’s Take It Up to 50,000 Feet** –
Conversations may take dives into the realms of committee work and staff duties. Avoid those by pushing the board back up to a visionary perspective – often described as 50,000 feet and higher.

**Can We Put that Idea in the Parking Lot?** – Not every idea will fit in the current budget or strategic plan. For ideas with merit, suggest it be put in the “parking lot” for consideration when the timing and resources are right.

**What’s Next?** – The ideal closing question at meetings is, “What’s next?” This provides opportunity to improve understanding, clarify expectations and make assignments.

Directors with an ear for good governance will recognize and avoid the distractions, traps and “rabbit holes.” Everyone is encouraged to use the more powerful statements associated with good governance.

Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates for associations and chambers at [www.nonprofitcenter.com](http://www.nonprofitcenter.com)
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