

THE CEO'S
Unexpected

FIELD GUIDE TO
BOARD MEETINGS

10 Lessons CEOs Don't Expect to Need
—But Can't Run a Board Without



Introduction

Board meetings are where some of the most important conversations a company will ever have take place. Conversations that can become a powerful force multiplier for the business.

Yet few CEOs, whether they're running their first company or their fifth, are ever formally taught how to run one well.

Instead, every leader develops their own approach over time... a quiet playbook shaped by experience, observation, and instinct.

This field guide captures ten principles that consistently lead to sharper, more productive board conversations.

1

Treat Pre-Reads Like the Real Meeting

The board meeting doesn't start when everyone walks into the room.

It starts the moment materials hit inboxes.

If directors aren't prepared, aligned, and reacting before you meet, you're not running a board meeting—you're running a read-along.

2

Stop Reporting. Start Driving Decisions.

If your board meeting is 80% updates and 20% discussion, you've inverted the value.

Updates belong in the pre-read.

The meeting is for tension, tradeoffs, and decisions that move the company forward.

3

Design for Mobile (Because That's Reality)

Your directors are reading materials on planes, between meetings, and on their phones. If they have to pinch-zoom a 60-slide PDF, you've already lost engagement. Accessibility isn't cosmetic. It's strategic.

Larry: *Why wasn't I at the funeral? Why didn't you call me?*

Nat: *Because she told me not to bother you, you know...*

Larry: *She told you not to bother me! What's that supposed to mean?*

Nat: *You were in New York. You were busy.*

– Curb Your Enthusiasm

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Surface Questions Before the Live Meeting

The most expensive question is the one first asked in the meeting. Create space for comments and pushback before everyone gathers. Alignment in advance turns meetings into acceleration, not clarification.

5

Script the First Five Minutes

Your opening sets the tone for everything that follows. Frame the strategic priority, clarify the decisions you need, and focus attention on what truly matters. If you don't define the agenda with intention, the loudest voice in the room will define it for you.

6

Ruthlessly Cut Slide Debt

Board decks have a way of growing heavier every quarter. Slides get duplicated, legacy charts linger, and reporting expands to fill space rather than drive clarity.

Over time, this “slide debt” makes materials harder to navigate and decisions harder to see. If a slide doesn’t inform a decision or sharpen understanding, it doesn’t belong.

Clarity compounds. Clutter does too.

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Make Ownership Visible

Every meaningful discussion should end with clear decisions, defined ownership, and a timeline for action. If accountability is implied instead of explicit, momentum quietly evaporates once the meeting ends. The board shouldn't leave with general agreement, they should leave with alignment on who is doing what next.

Visibility creates follow-through.

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Run a Pre-Mortem on the Meeting Itself

Before the board meeting happens, pause and ask: if this goes poorly, why? Maybe the materials aren't clear. Maybe there's too much reporting and not enough strategic tension. Maybe the real decisions aren't surfaced.

Identifying those risks in advance allows you to fix structure before you're trying to fix dynamics in the room. Strong meetings are designed, not improvised.

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Script the Last 10 Minutes

Don't let the meeting drift toward an informal close. The final minutes determine whether the board leaves aligned or uncertain. Revisit key decisions, confirm commitments out loud, and reinforce next steps. A deliberate close ensures that energy leaves the room focused and forward-moving, rather than scattered across unresolved threads.

Listen, here's the thing. If you can't spot the sucker in the first half hour at the table, then you ARE the sucker.

- Mike McDermott, Rounders

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Measure the Board Meeting Like a Product

Board meetings shouldn't run on habit — they should improve over time. After each one, ask whether decisions were sharper and alignment was stronger than the quarter before. If not, the format needs to change. Treat the meeting like a product and refine it every time.