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[Board Cafe](#) ^[1] • By Jan Masaoka • May 30, 2011 • [Email](#) ^[2] [Print](#) ^[3]



Very often the only time a board member is given the "microphone" at a board meeting is when he or she is making a committee report. *But wait a minute!* Why do we ask people onto boards because of their knowledge and perspectives, but never give them a chance to share their knowledge or perspectives with us?

Instead, at each board meeting schedule a **7x7** ("seven by seven") **Board Briefing**: a board member makes a 7 minute presentation, followed by 7 minutes of questions/answers/responses. Friendly-but-fierce timekeeping is required to keep to the 7 minutes each and the whole thing

takes 15 minutes.

An example that will spark ideas for your organization is a list of 7x7 Board Briefings given at one AIDS organization, each by a board member:

- A marketing executive at a bank gave a presentation on marketing principles that the board and staff should be know when planning awareness campaigns.
- A doctor told the moving story of working with his first AIDS patient.
- A pharmaceuticals manager presented (with powerpoint!) on trends in the drug industry and what impacts they might have on patients
- A client told about her experiences using the services of the organization, with both praise and problems
- A major donor (to this organization and to others) chatted about how he and other wealthy individuals have similar -- and different -- preferences on how they like to be approached and recognized

Several problems get solved in one fell swoop with the 7 x 7 ("seven by seven") Board Briefing. These include:

- Despite introductions and occasional social events, many of us board members struggle to remember who that board member is, and whether she's the real estate agent or the jewelry store owner. The 7x7 Board Briefings give us something to remember about someone, and something





to talk to them

- When reports are given by staff (and not board members, except for committee reports), the implicit message is that staff have knowledge to share and board members don't.
- A strong board member who is not a committee chair only has a reason to speak when reacting to something.
- Board members are often asked onto the board because of past experiences or a valuable vantage point. But we seldom ask them to tell us about those experiences or those vantage points.

Over time, every board member (who is willing to) will do a Briefing, and board and staff members will know each other in more meaningful ways than through an icebreaker at a retreat. We learn something about the depth and insights that a board member can bring to a discussion, and thus we are able to prompt them: "Joe, I'm thinking back to your Briefing about marketing. Do you think this plan for marketing our annual dinner is a good one?"

The board chair (or anyone designated) can talk with board members and schedule their Briefings onto future agendas. You will see that they bring knowledge, warmth, and cohesiveness to the board . . . and in only 15 minutes!

Jan Masaoka ^[4] is editor in chief of *Blue Avocado*, and former board chair of the above-mentioned AIDS organization.

See also in *Blue Avocado*:

- [Where Should the Board Chair, the ED, the Staff Sit?](#) ^[5]
- [Ten Quick Ways to Invigorate Board Meetings](#) ^[6]



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