

TEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE SELECTBOARDS¹

1. Conduct Good Meetings and Hearings

- a. Selectboard Meetings are original reality TV
- b. Where you are most visible to the community, where most constituents will “experience” you and the board
- c. Reflects the values, priorities, and character of your board, which determines how long you stay elected and who chooses to join you
- d. Highly Effective Boards:
 1. Understand the Open Meeting Law, which:
 - a. Requires that boards may only take action in a duly warned meeting
 - b. Requires the public be offered an opportunity to participate
 - c. Requires the chair to enforce reasonable rules and maintain order
 - d. Does not require you to meet late into that evening until every point is exhausted
 - e. Does not require you to allow the public to weigh in whenever they are inspired for as long they wish.
 - f. In short, Selectboard meetings are meetings *in* public not *of* the public (that’s a hearing)
 2. Adopt Rules of Procedure, which address:
 - a. How to access agenda
 - b. Process for making and approving motions
 - c. How and when the public can participate
 - d. Requirements for civility among participants
 - e. How the agenda may be amended if it need be
 - f. Establish a normal time at which the meeting will end
 3. Good Meetings
 - a. Attract good candidates to your board
 - b. Balance the public’s right to participate with your right to make decisions at a reasonable hour
 - c. Reflect the values of your board (respect, civility, diversity of opinion)

2. Understand and Demonstrate the Elements of Teamwork

- a. Once you get elected, your most important constituents become the other board members, because you can’t achieve anything without their votes.
- b. By law, one member has no authority and may not act, unless authorized to do so by the full board.
- c. Beyond the board, your team also consists of the other officers in town.

¹ Some of these concepts were developed by research conducted by Carl Neu, Jr., a leading consultant in this area, whose ideas were published in the article, “10 Habits of Highly Effective Councils,” *Public Management* 79(November, 1997): pp 4-9. They have been adapted for Vermont based on our experience in the Municipal Assistance Center.

- d. Though not explicit, the statutes assume that everyone is working as a team; there is no provision for removing elected officers.
- e. Highly effective boards:
 - i. Orient new members
 - ii. Conduct period retreats to address their relationships and goals for the board and organization
 - iii. Actively reach out to other officials in town, particularly clerk/ treasurers.

3. Master Small Group Decision Making

- a. It's up the Chair to run the meeting
- b. Good Rules of Procedure and an Agenda with times on it allows the Chair to enforce reasonable Rules.
- c. Unlike Town Meeting, which operates on Roberts Rules and starts with a motion and then a second and so on...Selectboard meetings are the opposite.
 - i. They start with a notion, or a topic, or a concern, and may eventually get to a motion, or may not.
 - ii. The Chair's job is to either help you get to a motion, or recognize that no motion is forthcoming and table the discussion.
 - iii. This requires significant force and the tolerance of other board members.
 - iv. Highly effective chairs allow other members to advocate so they may focus on moving the meeting along...it's rare that the body will tolerate both for long.

4. Understand or Create Clear Organizational Structure and Understanding of Roles

- a. Three Primary Forms
 - i. Selectboard / Manager Form
 - 1. Manager is CEO and supervises all staff
 - ii. Selectboard / Administrator Form
 - 1. Administrator may be CAO or may be general assistant to the board
 - iii. Selectboard / Clerk / Treasurer
 - 1. Most common, most complex, and most difficult
 - 2. All are elected and independent
 - 3. Selectboard needs the clerk and treasurer more than they need you
 - 4. Most successful relationships are when all three work closely as a team, based on clear, written expectations about what the position entails and what the expectations are.

5. Focus More on Policy and Less on Administration and Management (Stay Out of the Weeds)

- a. Boards excel at deliberating, vetting, considering, advocating, and (if you're lucky deciding).
- b. They are not well equipped for administrating, managing people, and establishing procedures which implement policy decisions.
- c. Small towns have fewer people to delegate such matters to, but delegate they must.

6. Ensure Financial Management Procedures are in Place

- a. Vermont law has minimal financial management requirements for towns
 - i. No obligation for Treasurer to report to Selectboard until a deficit occurs
 - ii. Most elected auditors cannot adequately audit your books and provide false assurance
 - iii. Regular external audits and elimination of elected auditors may be appropriate
- b. Request monthly reports from the Treasurer; if unwilling or unable to provide hire a bookkeeper

7. Think, Plan, and Act Strategically

- a. Few Vermont communities have strategic plans... many have land use plans and capital plans.
- b. A strategic plan requires Selectboard members to think beyond next year's budget and focus on the long-term issues facing the community. That vision will then drive long term goals both for the board and for any staff which assist you as well as annual goals for the board and staff.
 - i. For example, the vision might be to revitalize a particular area of town that has fallen into disrepair.
 - ii. A goal which implements that vision might be to investigate extending water and sewer to the area or obtaining a community development block grant.
- c. Based on the overall vision, as reflected in the strategic plan, your appointed staff, boards, and committees can then set about developing annual goals which help attain that vision.
- d. The strategic plan should also drive your annual budgeting and regular policymaking process.

8. Develop a Conflict of Interest Policy

- a. State law does not require a conflict of interest policy.
- b. The absence of a policy and procedures for managing conflicts casts a shadow over many legitimate business functions with the town.
 - i. How many Selectboard members do business with the Town?

- ii. Does the member recuse themselves from that decision?
- c. Conflicts of interest are actually fairly easy to manage
 - i. Policy defines the conflict
 - ii. Member discloses the conflict and why he or she believes he or she can manage it.
 - iii. Chooses to recuse or not based on his/her assessment of the situation
 - iv. Disclosure allows public to decide for themselves and protects the member from accusations of wrong doing if they follow the policy.

9. Develop Mechanisms for Getting Regular Feedback from the Public

- a. Elections are one way to get feedback, but they're a mighty blunt instrument
- b. Public hearings allow you to hear from the extroverts with free time in the evening
- c. Surveys often bring in the introverts but they can be administrative cumbersome
- d. One of the best mechanisms is the town website, which allows you to post recent minutes; proposals from other boards or constituencies and solicit input.
- e. Some towns publish a weekly newsletter which distributes minutes, information, and events to a list serv in town.
- f. Most traditional form is at the regular meeting; it's crucial that those meetings are run in a way that encourages citizens to present their concerns to their government without stealing the show.

10. Invest in Continuing Education of Your Municipal Officials

- a. The primary qualifier for Vermont local government is a willingness to serve
- b. With a constantly changing regulatory landscape, new laws affecting everything from property appraisal to zoning almost annually, education should be a standing line item in every municipal budget.

Source: VLCT FY07 Selectboard Forum