

Sharing Food at Board Meetings

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By Susan Howlett

I think it's essential to have food at board meetings. Offering leaders refreshments signifies you value their volunteer commitment to the organization – it's a gesture of reciprocity. Breaking bread together also evokes a visceral response that makes people feel more connected, more unified as a body. And when people connect more deeply with one another, they are more likely to feel accountable to one another, and by extension, more willing to follow through on commitments. Here are several ways to ensure this is not a burden or a major expense.

#1 – One organization I consulted with invited board members to arrive a half hour before the board meeting to share a simple meal and some informal conversation. The day of the board meeting, a staff person would throw some basic ingredients into a slow cooker and turn it on to simmer into a nutritious soup by the evening. Later the staffer would open a bag of prepared salad greens, toss them into a bowl with a couple kinds of salad dressing, and cut up a loaf of bread. They always had a stash of beverages to choose from, and some brownies or cookies or fruit to top off the meal. They told me it took less than a half hour to prepare, and cost very little, but it always smelled good when leaders arrived, and they felt cared for.

#2 – Another organization had a board member who loved to cook. One of his contributions to the organization was making the board meal each month, asking board members or the organization to defray his costs. He arrived at each meeting with hors d'oeuvres, a main dish, salad, bread, dessert and an appropriate wine. He recently published a \$15 book with a year's worth of recipes, called, *Feeding the Board: 12 meals for 12 or more people for about \$100 (including wine)*. Proceeds benefit the nonprofit, Studio East, 425-820-1800.

#3 – Some nonprofits rotate through the board, asking that each board member take responsibility for feeding the others at one meeting. It's important to establish a ground rule that no one will make their meal too elaborate, so that everyone can participate without feeling one-upped by others. Sometimes board members make the food themselves, and sometimes they buy it, while still others might have a caterer provide it and cover the cost.

#4 – Many organizations put board meals in the annual budget and pay for an outside source to bring something in each meeting, usually a hot entrée like lasagna or a casserole or pizza.

Even if you aren't interested in providing a whole meal, it's a gesture of gratitude and respect to have **something** on the table: popcorn, pretzels, chocolates, carrot sticks, cheese and crackers, nuts or cookies. Adjust the menu for meetings that happen earlier in the day. Bon appetite!