

## Case Study

### Planning Agendas and Avoiding Potholes

Beth El is a 300 member congregation in the Midwest. The membership was once 500, twenty years ago. The population is aging. Beth El still maintains a loyal core. There is an average deficit of about \$50,000 and this seems to keep board meetings on edge. Over the years, the staff has been reduced.

There is no longer an executive director at Beth El, so the president, the administrative VP, and the treasurer often function as unpaid staff, working long hours to deal with such tasks as bookkeeping, custodial work and facility issues.

While there is no executive committee, there are five officers. The officers do not want to take the time to meet in advance of the board meetings. They feel that would be a waste of time. The leading opponent of executive committee meetings is a longtime officer who argues, "We can just email our comments."

The officers often come to meetings with checks to sign and papers to review. They sometimes have their heads down looking at their papers as people come in the room or when the rabbi gives his D'var Torah.

The president called the board meeting to order at 7:30pm. Only about half the board was in attendance when the meeting started. The rabbi began with his *D'var Torah*. Members remained distracted. There were several side conversations.

The Beth El Agenda that night was as follows:

- Review of minutes
- Rabbi's Report
- President's Report
- Treasurer's Report
- Membership Report
- Old Business
- New Business
- Adjourn

It was the same agenda that had been used for years.

There were several topics for new business: The first person who presented suggested a beautification program. The Women's League wanted to raise money so they could develop a garden. She insisted: "First impressions are so valuable."

The second report was on volunteerism. The Men's Club wanted to create a major push to get male members to find some ways to make a contribution. The Men's Club representative noted that "while men have busy lives, we hope that the synagogue can find a way to tap some of their expertise to contribute to the service of the congregation." There was little comment on these two topics.

The third topic was on the condition of the parking lot. The harsh Midwest winters had put stress on the parking lots and there were always new potholes. Visitors to the congregation had to be warned to drive in slowly or they might get an unwelcome jolt.

Alan, the house chair, and his fellow house committee members (two past presidents) suggested they just fix these new potholes. The cost was about \$275. Joe asked, "Didn't we just fix a pothole three months ago?" The chair nodded.

Dave asked, "Do we really need to fix this now or could it wait? Really, I've just learned to drive around them. How hard is that?" Alan responded that the House Committee felt that they should fix them before a car was damaged or someone got hurt. This had been the synagogues approach when this had come up in the past.

Dave was a detail oriented person. "Who are we going to hire? Do we need to get more bidders on this type of work?" Dave said he had learned the hard way that it is always helpful to get more bidders. He continued, "My friend is at Beth Jacob (in the next town). His whole board just went along with the Building Chair's estimates on a remodeling job, and they went over by \$200,000. He sure wished he had stood up and questioned those numbers. Too many board members keep quiet, I think."

Another board member grumbled: "Why do we need to discuss this again? Let these guys just fix it?" Someone else countered in Dave's defense, "Don't you think \$275 is important? Are we here to just be a "rubber stamp" for Alan?"

Several other issues came up that took an unexpected amount of time. Several members wanted to discuss the size of the religious school packets. They wondered if they could save paper by doing them a different way. There had been a discussion about creating an overall fundraising committee that would coordinate all events and set some financial goals. These discussions never got off the ground. The board did focus on an upcoming major fundraiser. There was a heated debate about the start time for the event. Most thought 7:00. Another member said it would be hard for her to get there before 7:30.

One third of the members had left by the time the meeting was adjourned at 9:45.

Larry was a relatively new board person with some experience on other boards. He was upset by how many members had come late and left early. He was used to board members honoring their commitments. He was frustrated that so little time was spent actually mapping out a fundraising plan, since they had an ongoing deficit. He also noted that, in his first year the potholes issue came up several times and the discussion was more or less the same, and in the end, they always decide to spend the money. He also noted that Alan seemed to know a lot about this.

The President answered, “Yes, Alan is pretty knowledgeable. He is in the construction business and does asphalt work. He has been asked to supervise many important facility issues in the synagogue over the years. Larry, our process may seem a little inefficient, but the board has a policy that anything over \$250 requires a board vote.”

Questions for discussion:

- How did the board plan the agenda?
- What was the impact of the meeting on Alan, Dave and Larry?
- What would you do differently as president?