**Davis County Food Bank Case Study**

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Building Board Cohesion Virtually – Case Study

Arnold Baker was worried. As Board Chair of the Davis County Food Bank, he sensed a gradual decline in the connections Trustees felt both toward the organization and for one another. He knew this probably was due to the pandemic and the resulting move to virtual meetings and resolved to take action to address that. He realized that this would require real effort. Fortunately, he had a plan.

Arnold started by enlisting several Trustees to help manage the upcoming Board meeting. He thought this would provide additional opportunity for them to work together in advance and to feel involved during the meeting, and he knew that he couldn’t handle all the tasks on his own. He invited the prospective helpers to a Zoom planning session two weeks prior to the meeting. He included the Executive Director (ED) and other staff he knew would need to present at the meeting: the CFO and the VP of Development. The Trustees he invited were:

* Sarah, who would admit people from the waiting room and make sure they felt welcome and included.
* Jose, who would monitor both the Chat and the Participants panels to alert Arnold of any questions or raised hands.
* Tonda, who would help members with connection or tech troubles and manage the breakout rooms and polls. Arnold knew that Tonda was a digital native who could do this; otherwise, he would have asked a staff member.

The pre-meeting Zoom call included tech staff to ensure that the helping Trustees understood their roles and the Zoom functions involved. Arnold allowed time for full introductions and social talk before diving in. He made sure to review everyone’s responsibilities and briefed them on the expectations for breakout room leaders. He went over the [meeting guide](https://www.huggett.com/publications/davis-county-food-bank-virtual-board-meeting-run-sheet/#.YDlJN11ucqz), which included clear time frames for each item. Arnold realized that in many ways it more resembled a Run of Show for a performance than a traditional Board meeting agenda.

The invitation for the Board meeting itself included this prompt: “Our organization’s goal is to feed and nourish the hungry in our community. Please come prepared to tell us in one sentence ‘What is one way in your life that you feed or nourish others?’” He also invited members to arrive by 11:30 am for the noon meeting so they could spend some unstructured social time together.

At 11:30 a dozen of the 24 Board members logged into the Zoom meeting. Sarah checked to ensure that all were legitmate participants and immediately welcomed them. Tonda then separated them into three breakout rooms of 4 each with the suggestion that they share a) why they chose to join the DCFB Board and b) one thing that might surprise the others about themselves. As other members logged in Sarah chatted with them until four were in the main room and Tonda sent them off to their breakout. When the next three came in she dispatched them to their room along with the ED. Arnold conversed with other stragglers until noon, when he had everyone brought back to the main room to begin the meeting.

Participants could see Arnold in front of his virtual Zoom background, which showed the façade of the DCFB’s main facility. He started the meeting by having Tonda show a slide with basic Zoom instructions – refreshers for most but important for a few, and a reminder of norms for everyone. (see example) Arnold asked everyone to open the Participants and Chat panels and to have their cameras on. He also encouraged people to use Gallery View and to make liberal use of the Chat box throughout the meeting. “Let’s practice by putting the Chat: 1) Where you are right now and 2) What is your biggest takeaway from the Board packet?” After allowing a few moments for members to respond, he asked each member to send a private Chat message to someone on the Board they didn’t know well. (Arnold hoped this would prime them to use private Chats throughout the meeting: doing so would connect members and he believed that they were preferable to other distractions, such as the emails and text messages on members’ screens that were unrelated to the meeting.)

Jose put in the Chat a list of directors present in random order. Arnold went down the list asking each participant to answer in one sentence the question he had sent earlier: ‘What is one way in your life that you feed or nourish others?’ Members were surprised at how personally revealing many of the responses were. One director said, “I spoon-feed my 6-month-old son breakfast every morning and that’s the best moment of my day.” Another remarked, “Every Monday since the pandemic began, I bring a homemade pie to the ER staff at the hospital where my mother works.” The Chat box was on fire with messages of amazement and support. The single-sentence restriction kept the entire exercise to under 10 minutes, but the interactions during that time were moving and Arnold could feel the connections growing.

Next the ED reported on the key issues on her plate, all of which had been described in the Board packet. They included 1) keeping workers and volunteers safe during the pandemic, 2) a lack of volunteers from corporations due to most employees working from home, 3) the need for a completely new accounting system, 4) Board diversity, 5) the prospect of expanding DCFB’s distribution reach, and 6) a decline in individual contributions. Tonda then launched a Zoom poll of the members: “What do you think is the biggest challenge we’re facing right now?” There were the six options plus an “Other (write in Chat)” and Arnold was relieved to see that most of the votes were for the two issues that comprised the bulk of the meeting’s agenda, #2 and #5. As the Board discussed each of these challenges, Arnold asked members to use the hand raise function or note in the Chat box their desire to be called upon, and Jose kept a running list in the Chat of interested members and the order in which they would speak.

Then came the financial report, during which Kai, the CFO, shared his screen showing key charts. At the end Tonda polled the Board asking, “How comfortable are you with our financial situation?” As expected, most members’ responses paralleled Kai’s summary statement, and Arnold was pretty sure that the one outlier was the same member who had spoken up during the discussion.

Next the Board dug into the most contentious issue. DCFB had planned to begin distributing food at a site in a largely Black neighborhood but paused that effort when the pandemic struck and both volunteers and contributions declined. Then George Floyd was murdered. Several Board members argued that the plan should be implemented immediately despite the operational and financial challenges. Others insisted that given the reduced resources any expansion would come at the expense of current beneficiaries. DCFB had been stuck on this issue for months. Moving forward would involve some tradeoffs and Arnold wanted directors to grapple with them. He had Tonda put directors into 5-person breakout rooms for 20 minutes, with Sarah assigning them the question: “Should DCFB distribute food within the Riverview District for the next 12 months, funding it either by taking $90,000 from our financial reserves or reducing distribution elsewhere?” The participants from the planning meeting served as facilitators, who called on each director in turn and used timers on their phones to remind participants when their speaking time was up. Upon reconvening, the facilitators wrote in the Chat 1-2 sentences summarizing their breakouts’ responses. Arnold read these and commented, praising the points raised and noting that they were inconclusive. A few directors spoke before Arnold, realizing that one of the two Black directors had been quiet, asked “Gerald, what do you think?

There was an awkward silence. Another director remarked, “I don’t think we should expect Gerald to speak for all Black stakeholders.” Arnold immediately realized why his well-intentioned query made everyone uncomfortable, but before he could say anything Gerald responded, “That’s OK. I can’t speak for everyone who is Black, but I do have an opinion. If we’re serious about serving the Black community, we should tap into our reserves and begin the expanded distribution. The point of reserves is to address extenuating circumstances, and these qualify.”

That provoked a flurry of comments. The Finance Committee chair quoted data showing DCFB’s current proportion of Black beneficiaries and expressed “grave concern” about tapping into reserves while the balance sheet was shrinking. Another member supported fiscal conservatism but favored shifting resources from current sites to allow for expansion. The largest donor on the Board declared it unwise to take on a new responsibility with the future uncertain or to reallocate from longstanding sites to one that wasn’t even expecting help. During this discussion Arnold made a point to call on members whom he thought had important perspectives or relevant expertise. Once all views were expressed, Arnold had members vote for their preferred action using the hand raise function. The results: of the 22 directors present, 15 voted to tap the reserves and expand, 4 to reallocate resources and expand, and 3 not to expand. Tonda launched a poll asking on a 1-5 scale “How supportive are you of the decision we’ve made?” Arnold was relieved to see that in the anonymous poll most Trustees voted Somewhat Supportive or Very Supportive, but he encouraged the few members who indicated otherwise to discuss their concerns with him privately.

Next the VP of Development made a brief report emphasizing the need to garner more corporate support. She asked that members put in the Chat box any companies they would be willing to solicit on behalf of DCFB. Once one director suggested a name, others followed, with each nomination encouraging more members to volunteer in a positive peer-pressure cycle.

Before concluding the meeting, Arnold had Tonda play brief videos from several families who had received food from the DCFB. These were impassioned expressions of gratitude, and Arnold could see on his Gallery View that Board members were moved by them. Arnold used a final anonymous poll to evaluate the meeting’s success on a neutral 1-5 scale. He also invited members to make one suggestion in the Chat for how the next meeting could be better. Several members made suggestions; many more expressed gratitude for various aspects of the meeting: “That last video made me tear up.” “I learned more about my fellow directors today than I ever have when we’ve met in person.” “Who knew that David loves to cook?”  “This meeting was effective, efficient, and fun. Nice work!” Arnold felt nourished by the comments and saw that the format had brought out the best in the Board. Tonda saved the Chat log for future reference.

Finally, Arnold announced upcoming events: a virtual wine tasting session hosted by a wine-wise Trustee followed by unstructured social time, and a weekly series of “office hours” that would alternate between the ED, Development, Finance, and Operations. He adjourned the meeting but encouraged all who had the time to stay on the Zoom call for up to 30 minutes of socializing. When 10 directors stayed, Tonda split them into two breakout rooms for the first 15 minutes.  Three board members then left, so Tonda left the remaining 7 in the same room for the final 15.

As the last members logged off, Arnold realized that the meeting had been more interactive and more productive than prior Board sessions, including those held on site prior to the pandemic. He also acknowledged that he had prepared more intensively, designed the meeting in greater detail, and involved more Trustees to help than ever before. Though he still missed the hugs and group lunches, Arnold felt convinced that he could leverage remote technology to make the Board even more connected and effective than when it had met in person.