

## Nonprofit Board Governance:

# The Case for Real Presence in the Age of Virtual Convenience

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## Introduction

In 2025, the ease of joining a board meeting via Zoom is undeniable. For organizations with immediate operational demands, virtual meetings offer valuable efficiency. However, for nonprofit boards—tasked with stewarding missions and resources over generations—**virtual interactions often fall short of what true governance requires.**

## The impact of in-person engagement

Virtual meetings provide significant short-term benefits: lowered costs, streamlined logistics, and reduced travel demands. During the pandemic, these factors made virtual governance an urgent necessity. Yet what served as a prudent, temporary solution risks undermining long-term effectiveness if adopted as the baseline. Virtual platforms excel at managing tactical, transactional discussions; **governance, by contrast, is fundamentally strategic and relational.** When a meaningful exchange can be muted or lost with a single click, and when attention is divided, the subtle cues that foster debate on risk, mission drift, or future priorities are easily missed.

Nonprofit board meetings do not occur with the frequency of corporate management teams. **Each in-person gathering carries unique weight**, often requiring trustees to make pivotal decisions: approving a spending policy amid market volatility, endorsing a transformational program, or assessing a partner who may steward institutional assets for decades. These decisions benefit enormously from **face-to-face deliberation**: eye contact, informal conversations, and candid hallway exchanges build the trust and context essential to wise stewardship. A 2025 study by Northwestern University cites that in-person collaboration fosters almost twice as many meaningful connections as remote formats, benefits especially relevant for leadership bodies guiding organizations across decades.<sup>i</sup>

## The hallway dividend

According to the Spencer Stuart U.S. Board Index, the average board member is 63 years old, yet 34% of new appointees are serving on a board for the first time.<sup>ii</sup> This generational mix means that board meetings must achieve more than compliance and routine updates—they **must transfer knowledge, forge relationships, and build shared understanding** across generations of leadership. Relying on virtual formats to accomplish this is like teaching a seminar solely by email—efficient, technically possible, but rarely transformative.

Veteran trustees know that breakthrough ideas and mutual trust are often forged outside the meeting agenda: in a coffee break huddle, an impromptu dinner conversation, a quiet word in the hallway. These are the moments when context shifts, relationships deepen, and a board's collective wisdom emerges—**outcomes virtual meetings seldom deliver.**

## A fiduciary imperative

For nonprofit boards, in-person meetings represent a meaningful investment—of time, money, and focus—by both individuals and institutions, especially amid economic volatility and an uncertain funding landscape. Yet the cost of not gathering face-to-face can be far greater: weakened oversight, slower onboarding, and decisions made without the full depth of perspective. Regular in-person engagement is not a luxury; it is a cornerstone of strong governance and is essential for cultivating the sense of shared purpose and committed service that define effective boards. As stewards of missions that will outlive us, we owe our institutions something more than a series of scheduled screen-shares. We owe them our presence.



**Stephanie Lynch** is the Co-Founder and Managing Partner of GEM, a Charlotte, N.C.-based investment firm that partners with a select group of endowments, foundations, sovereigns, families, and other long-term investors to protect and grow multi-generational capital.

<sup>i</sup> PNAS Nexus, [Face-to-face or face-to-screen: A quantitative comparison of conferences modalities](#), Volume 4, Issue 1, January 2025.

<sup>ii</sup> Spencer Stuart, [Measure of Leadership: CEOs and Directors on Navigating Change](#), June 2024.

## ABOUT GEM

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