Running Great Meetings Using Parliamentary Procedure

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Friday, July 17, 2015

Our Topics

I. Authority/role of presider & members
II. Discussion
III. Motions & how they work
IV. “Point of Order” and “Appeal”
V. Six types of unacceptable remarks
VI. Meeting your challenge as elected officials
VII. Public comment sessions & role of staff
Voluntary Association

Three Duties of Leader
• Manage or administer the association
• Lead the association
• Preside at the association’s meetings

Key Point
During meetings, the presider is the servant of the group, and the group is the final authority.
Point of Order

- A motion claiming that a mistake has been made.
- According to Robert, can be made only by a member.
- We recommend authorizing staff to do this also.
- May interrupt a speaker if necessary.
- Must be timely.

Timeliness

- Must be timely.
- May be raised up until the next item of business is taken up.
- If you wait, it will be too late.
- There are a very few exceptions, but they are rare.

Agenda

- Prepared by leadership, but within control of council.
- Should be adopted at the beginning of the meeting (by unanimous consent or majority vote).
- Once adopted, takes a two-thirds vote to change it later during the meeting.
- Should state outcomes and give approximate times.
- Do not need to include approval of agenda in minutes.
Minutes

• We recommend “action” or “summary” minutes, not detailed minutes.
• Should record what is done, not what is said.
• For certain topics such as conflict of interest, main points made should be included.
• Do not include “he said, she said.” This is a waste of time and effort and makes minutes less useful.

Principle of Equality

• All members have equal rights, privileges and obligations.
• How is this right exercised?
• “No one may speak a second time until everyone who wishes to do so has spoken once.”
• The most neglected rule in all of Robert’s Rules of Order!

Why don’t we follow this rule?

• Boards tend to discuss their affairs in conversational mode.
• In conversations, dominant people tend to dominate,
• And agreeable people tend to let them.
• Must have a structure to make sure that everyone has an equal chance to speak.
• This is both fair and efficient.
Key Point
Discussion in council & board meetings is NOT A CONVERSATION.

HOW to do this?
• Members must seek recognition from the presider before speaking.
• Members must address their remarks to the presider, NOT TO EACH OTHER.
• If someone fails to do this, a point of order should be raised.
• Presider should keep track of who has spoken and who is requesting to speak.
• Alternately, may ask vice-chair to do so.

Main Motion
• A main motion “starts the action” of discussion and decision-making.
• A main motion may be made only when no other business is pending.
• It should be in writing if at all possible!
• Once it is made and seconded, chair must state it.
• Chair must state it again before the vote is taken.
Default setting

A main motion
- Needs a second
- Can be debated
- Can be amended
- Takes a majority vote to pass.

Eight steps to process a motion

1. Member makes motion.
2. Another member seconds motion.
3. Presider states motion.
4. Members debate and/or amend motion.
5. Presider restates motion.
6. Members vote on motion.
7. Presider states results of vote, whether motion passes or fails, and what happens next.
8. Presider states next item of business.
Amendments must be germane

- Amendments must be GERMANE to the main motion
  - GERMANE = RELEVANT
  - Remarks must be GERMANE to the subject under discussion
  - Chair decides whether something is germane or not.
  - Chair may also ask group to decide.

Amendments

- Amendments are proposed in order to improve the motion.
- They may be made at any time during debate.
- The group votes on the amendment BEFORE voting on the main motion. This is in order to “perfect” the motion, to make it as good as it can be.
- Once the fate of the amendment has been decided, debate continues on the main motion.
- Don’t forget to vote on the main motion “as amended.”

Ways to amend

- Add or insert words.
- Strike out words.
- Strike out AND add or insert words.
- Substitute.
Conflict of interest

- Know your state laws! They are paramount.
- In parliamentary procedure, means a direct financial interest.
- You may propose something that benefits a class of which you are a member.

Special rules for small boards

- Robert has special rules for small boards.
- In a small board, up to about 12 people, the presider may take part in discussion, make motions, and vote (if bylaws do not say otherwise).
- Nevertheless, presider must exercise restraint.
- Of course, as elected officials, you still have your right to speak once you become chair.

Remarks must be germane

When they are not, try this useful sentence:
“Members will kindly confine their remarks to the merits of the pending question.”
Dilatory motions

- dilatory = “time wasting”
- The chair has a duty to protect the members from motions that waste their time.

“Friendly amendment”

- Often misused.
- Handle this the same as any other amendment.
- Ask, “Is there a second?” etc.
- DO NOT turn to maker and seconder to ask if they accept the amendment – this give them improper power.
- Once a motion has been stated by the chair, the maker and seconder have same rights as any other member.

Refer to Committee

- Motion sending main motion off to another group.
- Should specify WHICH group it’s going to and WHEN it’s coming back.
- Can be debated, can be amended, takes a majority vote to pass.
Request for Information

- This is a request for information that is timely and relevant to the debate.
- Presider can respond three ways:
  - Respond yourself
  - Ask someone else to respond
  - Say, "We’ll get back to you later"
- Don’t allow people to GIVE information. You may ask, “What information does the member need in order to decide how to vote?”

Call the question

- Motion requesting that we stop debate and vote.
- Needs a second.
- Cannot be debated.
- Takes a two-thirds vote to pass.
- If it passes, stop talking and vote immediately.

Two-thirds vote

- Robert specifies this when members’ rights are limited or extended.
- Should be taken so you can see the result.
- DO NOT take by voice.
“Amend the amendment”

- A “primary amendment” applies to the main motion.
- A “secondary amendment” applies to the primary amendment.
- It CANNOT be amended.

Review - Three tricky things

1. Vote on the amendment before you vote on the main motion.
2. You can have as many “primary amendments” as you like, as long as they cover different aspects of the motion.
3. A “secondary amendment” is as far as you can go.

Precedence of motions

- Each motion has a number or rank.
- When a motion is pending (under consideration), motions with a higher rank may be made.
- Motions with a lower rank are out of order.
- The “main motion” has the LOWEST rank.
- There are 13 motions with ranks in all.
- The “flying dinosaurs,” point of order and request for information, do not have any rank.
Precedence of motions

7. Call the question  
4. Refer to committee  
3. Amendment  
1. Main motion

A great method – the “round robin”

• The chair goes around the table, asking each person in turn for their opinion. People may pass.  
• Important to have a pencil in hand, to jot down points or questions for when your turn arrives.  
• Chair must wait his turn also!  
• This rule applies to questions and answers also, and to discussions with staff.  
• Don’t let any two people “hijack” the meeting.

WHY use this method?

• Because the single most important factor in group decision-making is whether the individuals involved are thinking freely, and giving their true INDEPENDENT judgment. But oftentimes we fail to do this.  
• You can have “group genius” instead of “group think” if you hear from EVERYBODY before moving into decision-making mode.
Some people are too timid

- We are all subject to *doubt, deference,* and the *dread of being different.* It can be hard to speak up.
- In a healthy organization, members can express a differing opinion and still be welcome. Members know how to be clear about their views, while still staying connected to each other and the organization.

Some people are too bold

- If you are willing to run for office and serve on a board or commission, you have to have a healthy and strong ego.
- Some people have egos that are over-developed.
- They insist on getting their own way, not realizing that the only way to achieve anything is to work together, because...
- As an individual member, how much power do you have?

ZERO
Nothing
Nada
Zip
0
What is your authority?
All members of a governing board share in a joint and collective authority which exists and can be exercised only when the group is in session.

The Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure

As Thomas Jefferson said,
“An association of people who will not quarrel with one another is a thing that has never yet existed, from the greatest confederacy of nations down to the smallest town meeting or vestry.”

Therefore...
Compromise is not a four-letter word!
Richard Haass, President, Council on Foreign Relations

- “Government is the institutionalization of compromise.”
- “If you can’t solve a situation, keep it from dissolving into conflict.”

BUT

“Political life now is more about self-expression than it is about getting anything done….Elected officials are not rewarded for compromises; they’re rewarded for defending the tribe.”

*Bill Bishop in Cityvision*

Challenge for elected officials:

- To rise above this situation and look to the greater good.
- Our American strength lies in our ability to create “win-win” situations, and not to frame everything as a “win-lose” situation.
The willingness to engage in honest debate and lose on issues you care deeply about reaffirms your commitment to common citizenship.”
*Cornell Clayton, Washington State University*

**Key language**

“Does anyone have any concerns that have not yet been expressed?”

**Basic rules for discussion**

1. All members have an equal right to speak and make motions.
2. Non-members do not have the right to speak or make motions. However, the body may invite anyone it chooses to speak.
3. One subject is discussed at a time.
4. One person speaks at a time.
Basic rules for discussion

5. No interrupting (except in certain special circumstances).
6. Courtesy and respect are required at all times.
7. No one may speak a second time until everyone who wishes to do so has spoken once.

Appeal

• The most important motion in all of Robert’s Rules – and the least known! 
• Question being voted on is, “Shall the decision of the chair be upheld?”
• Takes a NEGATIVE vote for the appeal to win. A majority vote or a tie upholds the chair’s decision.
• Chair must take care in explaining vote to members.

Flow of Authority at a Meeting

The group adopts its rules and guidelines.

↓

In attending, members accept the rules of the group.

↓

During meetings, the presiding officer applies the rules for the benefit of the group.

↓

All persons present at a meeting have an obligation to obey the legitimate orders of the presiding officer.
Flow of Authority at a Meeting

Any member who disagrees with a ruling, decision or order by the presiding officer may appeal the ruling.

If another member seconds the appeal, the group will decide by majority vote whether the ruling, decision or order is legitimate.

The presiding officer obeys the group's decision.

Accountability Hierarchy

Table

- Often misused. In Robert, should not be used to kill a motion.
- Presider may ask, “For what purpose does the member seek to table the motion?”
- Any time someone says “I move to TABLE this UNTIL X time,” they should be saying, “I move to POSTPONE this until X time.”
- A tabled motion must be “taken from the table” at this meeting or the next, or it dies.
- Cannot be debated.
Central paradox

- The presider is the most important person in the room, AND the least important person in the room.
- The presider must be strict on process – a "benevolent dictator."
- The presider is not responsible for the decision that the group makes.
- The presider is the servant of the group, and the group is the final authority.

Unacceptable Remarks

1. Personal remarks
2. Discourteous remarks – insulting language, attacks
3. Inflammatory language
4. Referring to another member’s motives (except for conflict of interest)
5. Criticizing past actions of the group (unless subject is under discussion, or about to propose a change)
6. Remarks that are not germane (relevant) to the discussion

When in doubt...

- Ask the group!
- You don’t have to have all the answers.
- Avoid “white coat syndrome.”
- The group is the final authority.
Object to Consideration

• If a motion is made that is potentially harmful, a member may "object to consideration."
• Must do so BEFORE any debate has begun.
• This motion cannot be debated, and no second is needed.
• Chair simply takes vote by show of hands, asking for those who want to discuss the motion, then those who don’t.
• If two-thirds do not want to discuss the question, the motion will not be taken up.

Unanimous consent

• Form of voting – a type of “fast track.”
• Very efficient.
• Presider suggests something, and if you agree, REMAIN SILENT. Silence means consent.
• If you disagree, say “OBJECTION.”
• Presider then knows that everyone does not agree, and abandons the fast track to use the regular method.

Public Comment

• You may be holding a meeting in public, but the “public comment” period is NOT a public meeting.
• Be clear about guidelines in advance.
• Be consistent in applying them.
• Set up “pro” and “con” microphones and alternate.
• Purpose is to gain information, not to debate issues.
• Don’t get into “back and forth” with individuals.
Public Comment

• Maintain a pleasant demeanor without smiling too much.
• Listen to each speaker as if there were no one else in the room.
• Chair should speak for board if warranted.
• Be prepared to make statements on controversial points, if appropriate, without debating (prepare in advance).
• Defend staff if appropriate.

Role of Staff

• Staff are advisers to the body, not members.
• The body may invite them to speak at its discretion.
• Staff should be empowered to make points of order and to speak up on own initiative on occasion.
• Staff and members should not enter into conversations that "hijack" the meeting.
• Members should defend staff when unjust or fanciful accusations are made, without becoming defensive.

Principles of Meetings

1. The majority must be allowed to rule.
2. The minority have rights that must be respected.
3. Members have a right to information to help make decisions.
4. Courtesy and respect are required.
5. All members have equal rights, privileges and obligations.
6. Members have a right to an efficient meeting.

(with thanks to Jim Lochrie)
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