



Effective Meetings

Rosa was recently elected board chair. One month before her first meeting as chair, she emailed out the agenda and all the attachments for the board meeting. She had been told the agenda needed to be created early, so when Malcolm suggested a topic he wanted to discuss that had been tabled two months ago, she told him to just bring it up under old business.

She arrived early and brought a few extra handouts. She made coffee, took a few deep breaths, and declared herself ready. John came in first, and asked for a copy of the handouts. “I do not have email”, he said, “so I have not had time to prepare, and I do not feel ready.”

By 6:30pm, the scheduled start time, only a handful of people were there. Although they had a quorum, she wanted to hold the start time until a few more people she knew were coming had arrived. During the meeting, she tried to keep everyone on track. She knew one of her complaints when she was vice-chair was that the meetings often went a half-hour longer than the scheduled one-hour. So, as soon as time on a certain subject was up, she ended conversation and moved on. Unfortunately, she spent so much time watching the clock she was not always sure what was being said.

At the end, there was no time for Malcolm to present his old business. “Just hold on to it until next month,” Rosa said. “I will put it on the agenda.” “I hope we have time to actually discuss it,” Malcolm said, as he walked out the door.

Meeting management is a skill often overlooked by leaders and managers. Many believe running an effective meeting is something that just comes from sitting in many, many meetings over the years. Unfortunately, those meetings are often ineffectively managed. Knowing what you like and do not like about past meetings you have seen is a good start to figuring out how to make future meetings more effective.

What do I need to know?

- Robert’s Rules of Order work.
- An agenda is vital to keeping a group on time.
- Respect the needs of the participants and the needs of the organization.

Why should I use Robert’s Rules?

Some type of parliamentary procedure—sometimes known as parlipro—should be used to manage discussion and decision making during a board meeting. At the heart of parlipro is the concept of following the will of the majority while ensuring the minority is heard. This has become the standard way of running boards, and if used correctly, can ensure your board is efficient and effective. Robert’s

Rules in their entirety are very rarely used. However, board members should be familiar with a few basic procedures.

What are the basic elements of Robert's Rules?

The following basic steps are typically used by boards to manage the process of making a decision:

- **Make a motion:** Someone states the action that they recommend for board approval. This motion, while pending, is often referred to as “the question.” If you know ahead of time that you will be making a motion for board action, it is best to put it in writing prior to the meeting.
- **Second the motion:** Another member must agree to the motion for it to be discussed and voted by the whole body.
- **Discussion:** Once seconded, the chair invites discussion of “the question.” Anyone can talk about the motion and raise points for or against it. Sometimes in the course of discussion, amendments to the motion are made to reflect ideas that are presented.
- **Call the question:** The chair or any member of the board can “call the question” to end discussion. If the group must agree to end discussion prior to voting.
- **Voting:** The chair calls for action by asking those present to indicate whether they are “in favor,” “opposed” or “abstain” from voting. Members may abstain (not vote) because of a conflict of interests or for other reasons and usually state their reason for not voting. The motion is usually adopted (or “carries”) if a majority are in favor. For some actions, the by-laws may require more than a simple majority for approval.

Robert's Rules include steps for many other situations but these basics should get you started. This module is not meant as a training guide to parliamentary procedure. If you are interested in becoming an expert parliamentarian, there are training programs for you. For more information about how to handle parliamentary procedure, check out [*Robert's Rules of Order Made Simple*](#).

But I am not the chair...

All participants in a meeting have some basic responsibilities. These include:

- **Basic meeting etiquette**
 - Arrive on time.
 - Stay on task; conversation should be germane to the topic.
 - Be prepared; review handouts before arriving, and take the time to think of questions or clarifications (if you need basic background information because you are new to the group, request it before the meeting).
 - Respect the chair and fellow participants.
- **Discussion**
 - Do not dominate the discussion. Everyone wants to be heard.
 - Speak up. Assume that your voice is significant. You have a fiduciary responsibility to know what is going on; exercise it!
 - Ask the tough questions. Do not be afraid that you are asking for too much information; as a board member, you have a responsibility to be reviewing it.
 - Ask people who do not speak up easily and who have not spoken, what they think.
 - Listen and be respectful of all others in the meeting, even when you need to disagree.

What do I do if I am the chair?

Keep in mind, the role of the chair is to be the impartial convener of the meeting. The chair must keep the meeting moving, in a way that allows everyone to be involved. In many organizations, the chair only votes to break a tie; this practice allows the chair to provide leadership, without getting involved in the emotions that can run high in a passionate meeting.

The chair is also responsible for making sure that someone is taking minutes to record what is decided at the meeting. The minutes of all meetings are useful for future reference. But minutes of board meetings are essential legal documents of the nonprofit corporation. It is important that they accurately record the decisions of the organization. At the next meeting, the chair should make sure that they are reviewed for accuracy and approved. Once adopted, the minutes are the official record of the actions of the board of directors.

Before even scheduling a meeting—be it a board meeting, committee meeting, or work-group meeting—the purpose of the meeting should be clear. Preparing for and attending a meeting can take a significant amount of time, particularly for those who have to travel. Unless a meeting is required by the by-laws, determining whether or not it is necessary should always be the first step.

Things to Consider Before the Meeting:

1. Dates and Times

There is a nonprofit board in New Jersey that meets every Wednesday night at 9:30pm, even though there were some complaints from board members. When asked why, the board officers simply responded, “*we always did it this way.*” It turns out, after doing some research, that the board had been founded by some members of a Chamber of Commerce, and the Chamber used to meet at 9:30pm. Even though the Chamber had gone out of existence, the precedent kept the board meeting at the same time. As soon as they found out about this, the meeting was changed to 7:30pm, and everyone was satisfied. Dates and times are important. Conflicting with other meetings can keep otherwise interested stakeholders from getting involved. Due diligence should be taken to ensure the meetings do not conflict with other competing events.

2. Agenda

An agenda should always exist for a meeting, and should be distributed beforehand. An agenda gives some organization to the meeting. It forces the meeting manager to think through what needs to be accomplished, allows participants to prepare ahead of time, and reminds people of what needs to be accomplished (just in case time becomes an issue).

Some organizations use a timed agenda. The timed agenda gives a specific amount of time for each area of the agenda. For instance, agenda item three may have 10 minutes assigned to it. This allows the participants to know in advance how long debate will go, and gives the chair a good reason to end debate when time is up. A chair should be very careful to ensure times are realistic when using a timed agenda, and time frames may need to be adjusted (with the permission of the group) depending on how the meeting proceeds.

Another tool for keeping a meeting moving is the consent agenda. The consent agenda allows a list of routine agenda items, which typically do not have debate, to pass as a group. For instance, minutes from the last meeting, membership reports, and finance reports could be part of the consent agenda. When necessary, consent agenda items can be removed from the consent agenda and considered on their own.

3. Distributing Handouts BEFORE the Meeting

It is extremely frustrating to show up prepared for a meeting, only to be handed 50 pages of materials that need to be read before everything gets started. Distributing data beforehand—proposals, reports, budgets, membership figures, etc—allows participants the chance to understand the information, formulate questions, and do their own research before the meeting, so there are not long periods of downtime while everyone is reading.

Things to Consider During the Meeting:

The chair sets the tone for the meeting and the interactions of the participants. Something as simple as neglecting to introduce everyone in the room can hinder positive discussion.

A chair needs to keep the meeting on time. If a meeting is planned for one hour, people expect to be able to leave one hour after the start time. That means starting on time, even if not everyone is there. It also means sometimes having a conversation with those who are chronically late or absent. Not attaining a quorum, or not having key players available, is very frustrating for those who take the time to be involved.

While half of keeping the meeting on time is starting promptly, the other half is ending as scheduled. If a board member does not know whether the meeting will end on time, he or she may be less likely to make an effort to attend so as to avoid having to leave early. One of the hardest jobs of the meeting manager can be walking the fine line between letting everyone share what they need to say, and not allowing the conversation to be dominated by one or two people or become repetitive.

Sometimes it is useful to ask a member of the group to help keep the group on time. If fifteen minutes are scheduled for the discussion, after fifteen minutes the helper can call time, and the board chair can make a final decision as to whether conversation should continue, or call for a vote

How do I get (and keep) people involved?

Everyone wants to be heard. People sit on boards, join committees and attend meetings so they can be a part of the decision making process. Keeping people from involvement is the fastest way to push someone away.

A hard part of chairing a meeting is being able to recognize when some people are not being heard. There are several ways to combat this. Try a “lean in, lean out” approach. Sometimes participants do not know they are not speaking, or do not realize they are monopolizing conversation. Ask all participants to be aware of their own behavior, and if they think they are not speaking enough, to “lean in” to the conversation, and if they are speaking too much, to “lean out” of the conversation. If the group is small enough, consider making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak once on the topic before anyone speaks twice.

Many successful organizations owe some of their success to the diversity of their boards, staff, and stakeholders. Remember, people come to meetings with differing skills, talents, and abilities. Some people need more time to think something over before discussing. Ensuring materials go out early lets them mull over the information. Some participants may not be native English speakers. If the meeting is being conducted in English, it may be necessary for others to speak slower, allowing time for the person to make sense of the point, or to give them time to hear a translation.

Every participant—but especially the chair—should actively watch out for participants who are sitting on the sidelines. It is all too easy for someone to be left behind at a meeting. This can particularly happen when a board is seeking to diversify and become more inclusive. It can be difficult for the lone woman to speak out at a meeting of all men, or for a person of color to speak out when they are the only person of color in a room. Sometimes it will help for the chair to have a conversation with the person, to talk about ways to make the situation more comfortable. The chair should watch out for visual cues that the person is interested in speaking—leaning forward, uncrossing legs, or a nod of the head—and ask the person if she has anything she would like to share.

A board that ignores or is disrespectful of a person from any background will soon lose that person. This point is essential for organizations to remember, particularly if they are seeking to become more inclusive. A key element of respect is listening.

After the Meeting

All participants want to know their contributions were listened to and respected. If nothing is done to follow up after the meeting, participants may feel like the meeting and their good efforts were a waste of time. To avoid this, create an action plan; make sure everyone knows what next steps will be taken. Share the plan with both those who attended the meeting and those who could not make it.

Review of the basics:

Can you now answer the following questions?

1. As a board member, what are some things you should think about to help meetings go well?
2. As chair, what do you expect of the participants in your meeting?
3. As chair, what should you do to help participants who are not fully involved in the board discussion?
4. Homework: Check out the Robert's Rules of Order links. Can you explain "the previous question," "quorum," and "amendments?"

Quick Links to More Resources about Effective Meetings:

Check out EffectiveMeetings.com, a resource center for meeting planning.

Get some tips for meetings from Meeting Wizard.

Read "How to Run an Effective Meeting" at bnet.com.

The Delaware Association of Nonprofit Agencies maintains a library of information in their InfoCentral. In addition, members of DANA can get sample policies and procedures for free.

Evaluation Survey: Tell us what you think about this Training Module?

Please take a moment to complete a brief survey to aid TOC in evaluating our program. We need your feedback to improve training for future trustees of color. Thanks in advance for clicking this link and answering a few questions:

[Effective Meeting Training Module Survey](#)