

At the call of the Chair...

A few tips and techniques for effective meetings

By Bob 'Idea Man' Hooey

Why have a chair anyway? Is it really important to have someone chairing a meeting? I'm sure, based on some of the meetings you've sat through that the chair wasn't really an asset.

Having chaired a fair number of meetings in my life, I understand just how hard it is to do the job properly. I do however understand the importance of having someone who can keep their eyes on the objective skillfully lead a group of people through an agenda to conclusions, commitments and positive action on those commitments.

Whether you are in a formal meeting or an informal gathering a chair can exert tremendous influence on the outcome. Every meeting needs a chair to direct the proceedings. The chair is the person selected to be in charge of the smooth running of a meeting. They have the authority to regulate the meeting and the responsibility to enforce any rules that govern the proceedings, keep order, and act to successfully complete the business.

The Chair has the added challenge of maintaining neutrality throughout the meeting while ensuring that all attendees make contributions, listening to the views of others, blocking any negative tactics used, summarizing views and decisions, restating motions clearly, being firm with awkward people and keeping to agenda and agreed upon time.

I'd suggest getting a pocket guide of Robert's Rules or some other parliamentary procedure manual as a reference to effectively doing this job.

Here are a few skills that will help you if you choose to take on this role. Brush up on these essential skills before you embark on the seas of chair-ship.

- Firmness and dedication to running meetings to time schedule and effectively and quickly dealing with any problems that crop up. Remember you are in charge!
- Ability to listen carefully and summarize relevant points succinctly.
- Flexibility is a great tool, especially when you must deal with different styles and tones and demands of those in attendance.
- Being open and receptive when listening (neutrally) to opinions you don't share, and to drawing people out so that those opinions can be fully heard, explored and considered.
- A marked degree of fair-mindedness that ensures that all views are aired and given equal consideration. Sometimes this is the hardest skill to hone.

In addition, please keep in mind these following points or guides:

- As chair you are responsible to ensure that any discussion is relevant to the points on the agenda and the items on the table for discussion. Keep them focused and on track.
- As chair you are responsible to keep order and to expel anyone who continually disrupts the meeting.

You are chosen by the whole to protect the individual, while allowing the whole to conduct business in a reasonable fashion.

- As chair you are responsible to repeat or restate any motion proposed by those attending to ensure that everyone in attendance has heard it and understood it prior to voting. You can have people put long motions in writing. You can also draw on the skills of your recording secretary to ensure you have a proper motion or amendment to restate.
- As chair you are responsible to sum up the discussion and go over the action points at the end of the meeting.

A few more suggestions:

- As chair, I'd suggest opening up the meeting with a short summary of the meeting's purpose and its agenda. You might even want to revisit the group's vision and mission statements and have them in plain view to assist those in attendance in keeping focused.
- As chair, remember to allow all parties to express their views on each item or subject under discussion. You will, on occasion, need to draw out some of those in attendance, and hold back those who would like to talk repeatedly.
- As chair, one of the biggest challenges is preventing or minimizing irrelevant debate and reining in rambling discussions. You need to help them keep on track, on focus and on time.
- One other challenge is to keep side discussions and talking to a minimum.
- As chair you are responsible to ensure that any voting procedure is followed correctly. If parliamentary procedure isn't your expertise and you have someone well versed in these skills, you can appoint them as your parliamentarian and seek their guidance when needed. I did that specifically when I was Governor for BC's 191 clubs. It helped!
- Depending on your rules, as Chair, you may be called upon to cast the deciding vote. But check your organization's rules of order and procedures first.
- Pacing a meeting is important. A suggestion might be to summarize actions to date and reminding people how much time is left on allotted time for additional agenda items.
- If time runs over, suggest postponing some items for another time. Seek guidance from those you guide on what items they want to discuss. Remind them if there are time sensitive or deadline-based decisions that must be made. As chair your job is to keep your eye on the big picture and the major goals as set by your group.

Being chair is not as easy as some would have you to believe. It is however a very important role in your group's effectiveness and ability to work as a team to achieve common goals and objectives.

Remember you are not there to make them ALL happy. In fact, if you do your job well, you will at times make many of them unhappy - when they don't get their own way. But if you do your job effectively, your group will achieve its goals on time and as a team. It's worth the effort.

For more information check your library for a book on parliamentary procedure. Or visit your closest bookstore and get your own pocket guide. It may prove to be an invaluable investment for you and your career.

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Bob 'Idea Man' Hooey, DTM, PRA, CKD-Emeritus, Accredited Speaker, 2011 Spirit of CAPS recipient is an inspirational leader, speaker, and a prolific author whose works include **'Legacy of Leadership, Strive for significance – lead on purpose!'**, **'Speaking for Success'** and **'The Courage to Lead!'** His articles have been featured in a multitude of North American trade and global consumer publications. He is a respected leader who has been honored by CAPS, NSA, Toastmasters, and the United Nations for his leadership contributions. His creative Ideas At Work have allowed him to travel the globe sharing insights, encouragement in 61 countries, so far. With Covid-19 he has been zooming around the globe to share his ideas. His **innovative Ideas At Work!** have been successfully applied by global leaders as well as Canada's 50 Best Managed Companies.