

## Running Effective School Board Meetings Using Robert's Rules of Order

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## Our topics

- I. Introduction
- II. Meeting debate
- III. System of motions
- IV. Voting and quorum
- V. Who's in charge?
- VI. Maintaining order
- VII. Inappropriate remarks
- VIII. The right kind of control
- IX. Public comment

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## I. Introduction

- We are in the City of Fernville in the League of Northwest Dino Cities.
- This is not entirely realistic – it is a fantasy – but there is some overlap with real life!
- We use broad strokes to convey the big picture.
- You are going to be the members of the school board.

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## Call meeting to order

- Sit in the chair reserved for the person running the meeting.
- Rap the gavel lightly one time and announce, "This meeting of the Fernville School Board is called to order."
- Ask the clerk to take the roll.
- Announce that a quorum is present (or not).

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## 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.

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## Purpose of minutes

According to Robert's Rules, the purpose of minutes is:

**to record the actions taken  
by the body.**

Minutes record what is DONE, not what is SAID.

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## II. Meeting debate

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## Principle of Equality

All members have equal rights,  
privileges and obligations.

8

## Key Point

Discussion in board and  
committee meetings is  
**NOT A CONVERSATION.**  
It is **DEBATE** and has its own rules.

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## Rules for debate

- No one may speak a second time until everyone who wishes to do so has spoken once.

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## This is **CRITICAL!**

- Applying this rule will transform your meetings.
- It is a **MUST** if you wish to maximize your effectiveness.

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## Why don't we follow this rule?

- Boards tend to discuss their affairs in conversational mode.
- In conversations, dominant people tend to dominate.
- 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.

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## Point of Order

*flying dinosaur*

- When ANOTHER MEMBER breaks one of the rules, a member may make a POINT OF ORDER.
- Chair rules on the point.

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## One thing at a time

- Robert's Rules is highly linear.
- Only one "main motion" can be considered at a time.
- This helps everyone keep focused.

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## HOW to do this?

- Members seek recognition before speaking.
- Members speak to the chair, not to each other.
- Chair keeps track of who has spoken and who wishes to speak.
- Can empower vice-chair to keep track – great training for them.
- Can use the "round robin."

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## Seeking recognition

- Raise your hand and wait to speak until the chair calls your name, nods at you, or gives some other sign that you have permission to speak (you "have the floor").

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## Speak to the chair

- Speak to the chair, NOT to another member.
- It is a kind of "SONAR." Everything pings back and forth between the chair and the members.
- This depersonalizes issues and improves clarity of discussion.

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## Speak to the chair

- This process means that members may not say "YOU" to another member, or address another board member directly.
- Insist on this rule!

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## Down the rabbit hole...

- If members speak directly to one another, often the discussion degenerates into a conversation between two members.
- “Down the rabbit hole” results in the rest of the group being left out.
- The “rule of equality” is violated.

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## If your members still can't stand to do this...

- Chair keeps a watchful eye to make sure no two people “hijack” the meeting.
- Chair can intervene and say, “We need to hear from everyone. Does anyone else wish to speak on this topic?”

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## One person speaks at a time

- When a member has the floor, they have the right to speak until they have completed their comments.
- Interrupting is ABSOLUTELY FORBIDDEN.
- Members may not interrupt each other, and chair may not interrupt members.
- Exception – point of order when essential.

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## HOW to do this?

- No whispering!
- No sidebar conversations!
- No texting!
- No checking cell phones!

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## What about time limits?

- Robert’s general rule is that each member may speak TWICE on each subject per day.
- Each speech may be up to 10 minutes.

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## What about time limits?

- In the “special rules for small boards,” Robert says there is no limit on the number of times members may speak.
- For school boards and committees, we do not believe it is necessary to limit number of speeches as long as you follow the “principle of equality.”

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## What about time limits?

- However, if length of speaking is an issue, we recommend that boards and committees adopt a shorter time limit – 3 or 5 minutes.
- See *Mastering Council Meetings* and blog entry “adopting special rules of order.”

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## An occasional exception...

- Sometimes there is benefit in the conversational style or “informal discussion.”
- This provides a sparky flow of ideas that can be beneficial, for instance at a study session.
- Committees are more likely to use the conversational style.
- However, it is still critical that no one person or pair of people dominate the discussion.

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## The four big mistakes

- Speaking twice in a row
- Not seeking recognition
- Speaking directly to another member
- Interrupting another person

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## III. System of Motions

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## Main Motion *Tyrannosaurus rex*

- For school boards and other public bodies, a main motion is the usual and customary way to start the action of discussion and decision making.
- Staff presents the proposed action, which has been provided in writing, answers any questions, and then a member moves acceptance of the motion to begin the discussion.

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## How do you introduce a main motion?

Three little words:

I MOVE THAT

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## Main Motion

- Do not say “I would like to move that...”
- Do not say “I would like to motion that...”
- Do not say “I recommend that...”
- Do not move a motion “for discussion.”
- Do not make a motion “that we should discuss this.”
- Do not make a motion “that we vote on this.”

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Rule	Motion to be taken	Does it require a 2nd?	Is it debatable?	Can it be amended?
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Begin a discussion or review.</b></li> <li>• <b>Take specific action.</b></li> <li>• <b>Call for a vote.</b></li> </ul>	YES	YES	YES
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withdraw a comment or suggestion.</li> </ul>	No	No	No
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>End the current discussion and return to the next action item.</b></li> </ul>	YES	No	No
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Reconsider a vote that may have passed too quickly.</b></li> <li>• <b>Change the direction of a discussion.</b></li> </ul>	YES	YES	No
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Clarify what the end result of a discussion should be.</b></li> </ul>	YES	YES	YES
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Close nominations for particular positions or assignments.</li> </ul>	YES	No	YES
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Adjourn the meeting.</b></li> </ul>	YES	No	No
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review a particular procedure to ensure it is followed correctly.</li> </ul>	No	No	No

## Main Motion *Tyrannosaurus rex*

- It should be in writing if at all possible (see 3-part forms).
- It should be **clear** and unambiguous.
- It should be phrased in the grammatical **positive**.
- It must comply with the **bylaws** and the **procedural** law of the land.
- It is in order when **no other business is pending**.

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## Second the motion

- You “second” a motion to show that you would like to talk about it.
- You can second a motion you disagree with if you want to explain why it’s a bad idea.

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## If no second...

- If there is no second, the chair says,  
“There being no second, the motion will not be taken up.”
- Then moves immediately to next item of business.

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## Eight steps to process a motion

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

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## Amendment

### *Dimetrodon*

- You amend a motion to improve it.
- The amendment applies to the main motion.
- The amendment must be germane (relevant).
- Anyone may move to amend, even the person who made the motion.

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## Amendment

- We vote on amendments before we vote on the main motion, in order to make the main motion as good as possible - to **perfect** the motion.

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## Process Amendment

- The amendment is processed using the same eight steps that we just saw for a main motion.

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## Amendment

- Once the fate of the amendment has been decided, debate continues on the main motion.

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## More amendments are possible...

- Once you've dealt with one amendment, you may have others...
- provided that they apply to a *different aspect* of the main motion.
- It takes special actions to go back and change something we've already amended.
- The only limit to the number of this type of amendment is the patience of your group.

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## “Friendly amendment”

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

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## Refer to Committee

### *Ankylosaurus*

- Motion sending main motion (and any amendments) off to another group for a recommendation.
- Should specify two things:
  1. Which **committee it's going to**
  2. When **it's coming back**

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## Process Refer to Committee

- Refer to Committee is processed using the same eight steps that we saw for the Main Motion and the Amendment.

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## Call the question

### *Triceratops*

- Motion requesting that we stop debate and vote.
- This motion requires a **second**.
- HOWEVER it cannot be **debated**.
- It cannot be **amended**.
- And, it takes a **two-thirds** vote to pass.

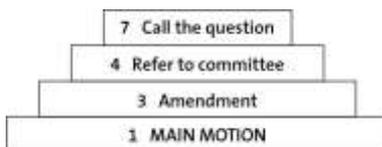
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## Precedence of motions

- Each motion has a number or rank.
- Motions are processed in reverse order ("last in first out" or LIFO).
- When a motion is pending (under consideration), motions with a HIGHER rank may be made.
- Motions with a LOWER rank are out of order.

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## Precedence of Motions



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## IV. Voting and Quorum

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## Quorum

- A quorum is the minimum number of voting members who must be present for business to be done.
- If not otherwise specified, it is a majority (more than half) of the voting members.
- DIFFERENT FROM the number of votes cast.

## Taking the vote

- State the question (issue to be voted on).
- Call for the affirmative vote: All those in favor say "aye."
- Call for the negative vote: All those opposed say "no." (Do this even if it seems unanimous.)

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## If the members aren't sure...

- Any member can call out a single word:
- DIVISION!
- The chair must then take the vote by a different method, such as a roll call.

51

## Retaking a vote

- When retaking a vote, the previous vote doesn't count.
- Members are free to vote as they choose.

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## Changing your vote

- A member has the right to change her vote up until the chair announces the result.
- After that time, unanimous consent is required for a member to be allowed to change her vote.

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## Majority vote

- Ordinarily, this means "a majority of votes cast."
- MORE THAN half, or MORE THAN 50%.
- DO NOT SAY "fifty percent plus one."
- You cannot have a half of a person.

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## Two-thirds vote

- AT LEAST two-thirds of votes cast.
- A two-thirds vote is normally required when **members' rights are limited or extended.**
- Should be taken so you can see the result.
- DO NOT take by voice.

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## Important distinctions

- Votes cast – easiest to obtain.
- Voting members present – more difficult.
- Entire board – most difficult.

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## Two-thirds vote in Utah

- Holding a closed meeting requires a 2/3 vote of VOTING MEMBERS PRESENT.
- Selling school sites or buildings requires a 2/3 vote of ENTIRE BOARD.
- Removing superintendent for cause requires 2/3 vote of ENTIRE BOARD.

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## Abstain and tied votes

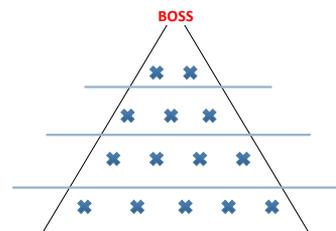
- To abstain is to do nothing. According to Robert, you can't vote "to abstain."
- However, "Coming to Order" booklet states that you must vote "yes," "no" or "abstain."
- A tied vote (equal numbers for and against) fails.

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## V. Who's in charge?

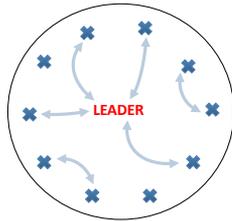
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## Accountability Hierarchy



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## Voluntary Association



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## Key Point

Each member has an equal right to speak and to try to persuade others to accept her view.

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## Key Point

During meetings, the chair controls the process so the group can make the decisions.

63

## Key Point

During meetings, the chair is the servant of the group, and the group is the final authority.

64

## What is each person's individual authority?

- As a separate individual, you have NO authority.
- Our society emphasizes the individual so much that this seems almost un-American.
- In fact, it is deeply and profoundly American.

65

## What is each person's individual 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

66

## The clash of opinions is vital

- The fact that people have different opinions is a strength. It's a good thing!
- BUT we tend to identify with our own position.
- When we are defeated, we sometimes take it personally.
- This is a mistake.

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## At the end of the day, the board must unite behind its decision.

- It is a basic democratic principle that the decision of the majority voting at a meeting is the decision of the body as a whole.
- The minority must make it their decision as well.
- It's a terrible system – but see Winston Churchill quote.

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*Democracy is the worst system of government in all the world, with the exception of those others that have been tried from time to time.*

Winston Churchill

69

## Bottom line

- In a democracy, HOW we decide things is more important than WHAT we decide.
- Courtesy and respect, no surprises, no unilateral action, no end-runs...these are essential for the system to work.
- And as for the minority...

70

## Protecting minority

- Robert's Rules emphasizes that the views of the minority must be protected.
- Members must have opportunity for free and full expression, even if their views are highly unpopular.

71

*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

72

## What is the alternative?

*The ballot box is sacred because  
the alternative is blood.*

Elias Canetti

73

## VI. Maintaining order

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## Order is essential

- Order is critical to fair and democratic meetings.
- Order is achieved by having rules and following them.
- If a body doesn't follow its own rules, consequences will occur!

75

## Within the board

- The chair has the duty of maintaining order and decorum.
- If the chair fails to do so, any member may speak up.

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## Point of Order *flying dinosaur*

- When ANOTHER MEMBER breaks one of the rules, a member may make a POINT OF ORDER.
- Chair rules on the point.

77

## Point of Order

- A motion claiming that a procedural mistake has been made.
- According to Robert, can be made only by a member.
- Public may not raise a Point of Order.
- **Member may interrupt** a speaker if necessary.
- **Must be timely – made at the time of the offense.**
- There are a few exceptions, but they are rare.

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## Point of Order Script

Member: *Point of Order!*

Chair: *State your point.*

Member: *That remark breaks our rule against interrupting.*

Chair: *The point is well taken. Members will refrain from interrupting each other.*

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## Use the “third person”

- Note that the chair states the general rule.
- The chair is speaking on behalf of the rules of procedure.
- Do NOT say, “You are out of order” or “You made a mistake.”
- Use the “third person” to keep things neutral and lessen conflict.

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## Chair doesn't have to say “point of order”

- The chair has the duty of maintaining order and decorum, so doesn't need to say “point of order.”
- Just needs to take appropriate action.
- Chair can always ask the group to decide if a point of order is correct (“well-taken”) or not.

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## Chair subject to same rules

- If the chair breaks one of the rules, a member may raise a Point of Order.
- The chair rules on own behavior, which seems odd, but is the way the system works.

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## Appeal

The most important motion in all of  
Robert's Rules –  
and the least known!

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## Chair's rulings can be appealed

- The CHAIR enforces order and decorum.
- The board is the final authority.
- Any two members can appeal a ruling of the chair.
- EXCEPTION: If the ruling is a matter of fact on which there cannot be two interpretations, the ruling cannot be appealed.

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## Can Appeals be debated?

- Appeals pertaining to language and decorum cannot be debated.
- When an appeal can be debated, note that the debate process is unique – different from any other discussion process in Robert's Rules.

85

## Explaining the Appeal

- Chair must take care in explaining vote to members.
- Question being voted on is, "Shall the decision of the chair be SUSTAINED?"
- Takes a NEGATIVE vote for the appeal to win.
- A majority vote or a tie sustains the chair's decision.

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## The heart of democracy

- By using Point of Order and Appeal, the group is the final authority.
- In our view this is the heart of our democracy.

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## VII. Inappropriate remarks

88

## Inappropriate remarks are not allowed

- It is a fundamental principle of parliamentary procedure that debate must be "germane" (relevant) to the topic at hand.
- Remarks that are not germane are inappropriate.

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## These remarks are inappropriate

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

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## Debate must be germane

- If any question arises as to whether a remark is germane or not, the chair rules, subject to appeal.
- The chair may also turn immediately to the board to ask the members to decide.

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## Important notes

- We are speaking here about discussion within the board meetings.
- These prohibitions DO NOT APPLY to the public when they are giving public comment.
- We recommend that board members follow these rules OUTSIDE meetings as well.
- This will increase the reputation and stature of the board in the eyes of the public.
- Speak to issues, not to personalities.

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## Why the rules on courtesy?

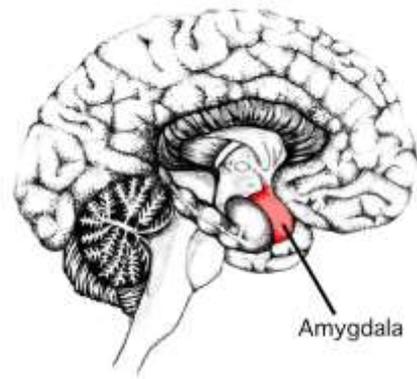
*Generally speaking, if a human being never shows anger, then I think something's wrong. He's not right in the brain.*

Dalai Lama

*Anger and intolerance are the enemies of correct understanding.*

Mahatma Gandhi

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## Send the right message

- No sarcasm
- No frowning
- No eye-rolling
- No sighing
- No checking cell phones

95

## VIII. The right kind of control

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## 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.  
↓

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## 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**.

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## Chair **MUST** control discussion

- Repeat: the chair must control the meeting discussion.
- The chair serves as a **BENEVOLENT DICTATOR**, enforcing the rules the group has chosen.

99

## We don't like this

- The modern style is completely opposite.
- We're encouraged to speak softly, gently, indirectly.
- We're encouraged to use "I" statements.
- Forget all that when running a meeting.

100

## A balancing act

- Radiate confidence.
- Speak clearly and definitely.
- At the same time, keep emotionally connected to the members.

101

## Brisk, warm neutrality

- It's important to be business-like and focused.
- Keep things moving.
- At the same time, show humanity and humor when appropriate.

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## Strength vs. warmth

John Neffinger and Matthew Kohut

*Compelling People:  
The Hidden Qualities that  
Make Us Influential*

103

## Chair MUST control discussion

- If someone speaks up without being recognized, STOP THEM.
- If someone speaks out of turn, INTERRUPT THEM.
- If someone make insulting remarks, STOP THEM.

104

## HOW to control?

“The chair should never get excited.”

*Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 11<sup>th</sup> edition, p. 456*

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## Language tips

- Phrase things in the positive.  
*We're not trying to hide anything here vs.  
We're committed to being transparent.*
- Give up on the word *but*. Always say *and*.
- Say *kindly* not *please*, which sounds like pleading.
- Say *very well* and move on.
- Don't say *you*. Always refer to “the member” or “members.”

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## IX. Public comment

- A board meeting is NOT a meeting of the public.
- It is a meeting of the board that is held in public.
- The purpose of the “public comment” period is to allow the board members to become informed about the views of the public.
- It should be carefully structured.
- Best to announce rules at beginning of each session.

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## Public comment

- For the sake of fairness, rules for public comment MUST be enforced consistently.
- Ask staff to time speakers so chair can listen intently.
- ALL MEMBERS should listen to the speaker as if there were no one else in the room. This is not easy!

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## Public comment

- Public should address remarks to chair, and chair should thank each speaker.
- Do not get into back-and-forth with the public. If individual board members start speaking with the public, the situation quickly becomes confusing.
- Do not allow demonstrations—clapping, booing, etc. These can chill free speech, both for board members and public.
- Invite the public to address factual questions to the staff after the meeting (not during meeting!)

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## Public comment

- The rules pertaining to discussion BY BOARD MEMBERS do not apply to COMMENT BY THE PUBLIC.
- The board may encourage citizens to speak politely but cannot enforce a requirement to do this.
- Under the First Amendment to the Constitution citizens have the right to express their views, even if negative.
- Be prepared with an action plan in case of difficulties. Consult with your attorney and staff.
- League of California Cities has excellent material on this.

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## Attacks on staff

- Board members should not criticize staff in public.
- If public attacks staff, do not get defensive.
- Do not get in a hostile exchange.
- Be prepared if appropriate to defend the staff in a calm, positive manner.
- Why? If no response is made, it can seem as if the body agrees with the criticisms.

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## Sample policy

- Now is the time to hear from our public. We welcome your comments which are very important to us. Note that all comments are limited to three minutes.
- As a reminder, please go to the podium to comment. It is helpful for the board if you would give us your name. Please address your remarks to the Chair.
- Note that we will not be entering into dialogue at this time. The purpose of this agenda item is for YOU, the public, to inform US, the board, about your views.
- If members of the public have factual questions, staff will be glad to address them after the meeting.

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## Other channels

- We recommend maintaining other channels for dialogue with the public.
- Community forums, personal discussions, a form on your website, surveys, etc.

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## Adjourning the meeting

- During the meeting, the members may move to adjourn – non-debatable motion, takes a majority vote to pass.
- At the end of the meeting, the chair may say, “There being no further business, this meeting is adjourned.”
- The chair may adjourn the meeting if a riot breaks out.

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## New resource

*Citizen's Guide to Effective Conduct of  
Public Meetings Using Parliamentary  
Procedure and Robert's Rules of Order in  
Washington State*

<https://jurassicparliament.com/citizens-guide/>

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## Central paradox

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

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