

# How to Survive a Meeting

## Meetings, Meetings, Meetings...

The first thing that must be done to make meetings most effective is to break them down into their individual elements. Meetings are compromised of six major parts:

*Planning for Meetings*  
*Agenda Preparation*  
*General Meeting Preparation and Strategies*  
*Parliamentary Procedure*  
*The Minutes*  
*Evaluation*

Your meetings are up to you and the members to make them effective, efficient, and **FUN** - but read on and find out how others complete this task and have great meetings!

## A. Planning for Meetings

There are many questions which must be asked to ensure a well-planned and organized meeting:

- *What is/are the goals of this meeting?*
- *Does everyone understand the goals and believe the meeting is worthwhile?*
- *Who will conduct this meeting?*
- *Who will prepare the agenda for this meeting?*
- *Who will distribute the agenda (and minutes from the last meeting) to the members?*
- *What is the date for this meeting?*
- *Have members been informed about the meeting with enough time to mark their schedule?*
- *Have the members been trained by leaders of the group or the advisor in how to be an effective part of a meeting and how to use Parliamentary Procedure?*
- *Where will the meeting be held?*
- *Does the room have the necessary audiovisual equipment?*
- *How is the room setup? Is it conducive to the type of meeting you are planning?*
- *Is the room/space in an area where noise, temperature, and lighting are controllable and comfortable?*
- *Have the executive board and advisor discussed ways to make the meeting different and fun?*
- *Will you be ready to start/stop on time?*

All right, so now you've planned the particulars of the meeting, but how do we conduct this meeting in order to accomplish the goals of having it?

## **B. Agenda Preparation**

Every meeting should be run by an agenda. This will assist you in running a smooth meeting. An agenda is the road map for your meeting. Many of you have heard the phrase “speeding off without a map.” Holding a meeting without an agenda is like driving through a foreign country without an aid of a map. Agendas should be written and distributed (in the ideal situation) before the meeting, but at least at the beginning of the meeting.

What is on an agenda? An agenda contains the order of items which will need to be covered during the meeting. An agenda should be in APA style (*Roman numerals, large letters, Arabic numbers, and small letter*). The following is a sample agenda.

### **1. Call to Order**

*Chairperson calls meeting to order.*

### **2. Roll Call/Attendance**

*Roll call can be time consuming but must be done for accountability. Use creativity and different methods: assigned seats, passing around sheet of paper, and getting signed in or signing in at the front door.*

### **3. Approval of Minutes of Last Meeting**

*Can be expedited by having minutes given before the meeting or as people enter the meeting. Chair must ask for any corrections or additions. If there are changes, usually these can be dealt with a friendly amendment; if not, the chair can state: “They stand approved.”*

### **4. Officer Reports**

- A. Treasurer*
- B. Secretary (if applicable)*
- C. Parliamentarian (if applicable)*
- D. Vice President*
- E. President*

### **5. Standing Committee Reports**

*This will help the organization to keep on top of committee progress, while reminding the committee chairs that they have an important role in the completion of business outside the meeting.*

### **6. Special/Ad Hoc Committee Reports**

*Any reports by specially appointed or ad hoc committees with a unique, one-time purpose of being setup.*

## **7. General Orders/Unfinished Business**

*Contain the following:*

- *A question that was pending the last session when it adjourned*
- *Any unfinished business that did not come up at the last session*
- *Any general orders from the last session that were not reached*
- *Matters made general orders by a majority vote (tabling).*

## **8. New Business**

*This is when business is introduced at the meeting using "Motions." Motions are pieces of business introduced by a member by saying "I move that..." (not, "I motion that." Any member can introduce business, but it would be preferable to have new business placed on the agenda ahead of time.*

## **9. Announcements**

*Chairperson (or other executive members) may make announcements at this time. Motions are out of order and should be discouraged.*

## **10. Program (Can also be at the beginning of meeting)**

*A program is an optional, but fun and informative, part of a good meeting. A program can be a film, guest speaker, workshop, or even an informal addition to a meeting like a party, refreshments, field trip, ice breakers, or whatever. Be Creative!*

## **11. Adjournment**

*Adjournment ends not only the meetings, but also the session. The next time the assembly convenes, it must start from the beginning of the agenda. (Remember, people support what they create. Get members input on the agenda and they will reflect their interest in the meeting!)*

Now that your meeting is prepared, your agenda is written and distributed, and your attitude is positive, let's run a meeting!

## **C. Meeting Preparation/Strategies**

An effective meeting is one in which everyone gets to express their opinions, all business is brought to a logical conclusion, and all parties leave happy and invigorated. It can happen! To be a benefit to an organization, the leader and members must understand the purpose of a meeting, the goal(s) of the particular meeting, and be committed to those purposes from beginning to end.

### **Keep in Mind!!**

The average person has an attention span of 21 minutes or less. Keep the meeting moving! Have skits, jokes, games, slide shows; utilize guest speakers or any other type of educational and/or social programs during your meeting time. This is not to take away from the business of the meeting, only to make it easier on the mind!

- Celebrate holidays and birthdays!
- Thank your members for attending!

- Have everyone clean up their own area! It is only fair to the next group coming in and builds a sense of responsibility for one's meeting space.
- Keep the meeting individual oriented.
- Pay attention to all points of view and value them.
- Most Importantly... Your meeting isn't effective if members do not want to come to the next one! Only settle for 100 percent attendance!

## D. Parliamentary Procedure

Parliamentary Procedure is the most misunderstood part of running a meeting. Used correctly, however, it can be the most effective in making meetings efficient and worthwhile.

**Parliamentary Procedure** is a set of "rules" for helping groups make decisions. **Robert's Rules of Order** is the publication which contains the rules which the Parliament of England uses to conduct business. Henry M. Robert first published Parliamentary Procedure in 1921 and his "Rules of Order" (usually found in America under Sarah Corbin's Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised), are recommended for groups to use in conducting business meetings. Groups should have included in their constitution the use of parliamentary procedure in meetings.

### 1) Parliamentary Procedure can serve as a D.O.M.E. for your meeting:

**Decisions** — a standardized accepted code of procedure for making decisions.

**One at a time** — the process of one item of business to be considered at one time.

**Majority** — the rule of majority and protection of the rights of the minority.

**Equality** — justice, courtesy, equality, opportunity, and common sense.

The basics:

### 2) What is a motion?

A motion is business to be brought before the meeting for consideration and action. The main motion is that which introduces business to the organization.

*For example: If I want to propose to the group that they allocate \$500 to the Special Olympics Games Committee for refreshments during the events, I would state: "I move that we allocate \$500 to Special Olympics for refreshments." Then I need a second.*

### 3. What is a second?

A second is someone else in the group who agrees that this piece of business is worth discussing at this particular time. If there is no second, the motion can not be considered by the group until there is another member of the group who wants to discuss the motion. Once there is a motion and a second, discussion may take place.

### 4. What is a discussion?

The chair says: "Is there discussion on the motion?" At this point, members of the group discuss how they feel about the motion on the floor. This is the trickiest part of the meeting for the chair. As chair, you must attempt to keep people on the motion and not on other matters. One of the best ways to do this is to constantly have the secretary read the motion when you feel the discussion is getting sidetracked. When discussion is going fine, and it seems like it is ending, it will be time for someone to call the question or move the previous question.

## **5. What is calling a question?**

This means that whoever said it is ready to vote. This may not be true of all members. The chair can ask if there is further discussion. If there is, either the group can continue discussion, or make a motion to close discussion. Closing discussion requires two-thirds vote. When discussion is closed, the motion moves on to a vote.

## **6. How can we conduct a vote?**

Before a vote, the chair or secretary must restate the motion so all members realize what they are voting on. Also, the chair must establish what response is appropriate for each side of the vote. "Those in favor of giving \$500 to Special Olympics for refreshments please respond by saying 'Aye'." This is an example of a voice vote. You can also vote by secret ballot, roll call vote, show of hands, or any other creative method your group can come up with to make it interesting. Remember to ask for abstentions! Even not wanting to vote on a certain issue is saying something, but don't let these members slip by without expressing some kind of opinion.

## **7. These are just the basics!**

This is Parliamentary Procedure in its most basic form. You can also table a motion, introduce a primary or secondary amendment, make a point of order or point of personal privilege, etc. It is suggested that your organization appoint a Parliamentarian to learn Parliamentary Procedure to teach it to the group, and keep the group on check during meetings. Here are a few suggestions on the proper use of Parliamentarian procedures:

- a) Get source materials – books, videos, etc. Study the concepts and begin incorporating the rules one at a time. Don't go too far too fast. It might be helpful for each member to serve as Parliamentarian for a period of time to learn how best to use "Robert's Rules."
- b) As you feel more comfortable, practice sessions could include "humorous motions." This can make Parliamentary Procedure more enjoyable. The only caution is not to carry these motions into the regular business meeting.
- c) Make a game out of term and actions and play as often as you can to get used to using terms correctly. The group may want to play a "Family Feud" type of game with the parliamentarian as host to get used to that person's authority.

## **E. Minutes – The Most Important Notes You Can Have!**

Minutes of your meetings are crucial to the success of your program. They establish a record of what has been discussed, what decisions and problems are being addressed and what is up for discussion at the next meeting. Reading records of minutes can help a group see what challenges have arisen in the past and how they were dealt with. They can be an invaluable resource, for they chronicle your board's history for future boards.

With the advent of more and more computers in student activities and student government offices around the country, minutes have become much easier than they were in the "good old days." The minutes are the (hopefully) accurate, written records of what has transpired during a meeting. Usually, the secretary is responsible for the minutes, but in some organizations without a secretary it might be fair to rotate responsibility for the minutes. Whoever accepts the responsibility must realize a few things:

1) *Minutes need to be taken carefully.* Minute-takers must write down quotes and events as accurately as possible. If people are misquoted they may get upset. Minute-takers should not hesitate to ask people to repeat their statements (especially main motions) so they will not be misquoted. Good handwriting, tape recorders and multiple note takers are very handy, as the minute-taker is not always the minute-typist.

2) *Creativity may be needed to get members to read minutes.* Anything you can do to help minutes get read will be helpful to your meeting efforts. Put them in high traffic areas, place cartoons in them, encode secret messages, and generally do anything necessary to get them noticed! The more they are read, the more informed and interested your group will be at the next meeting!

3) *Minutes should be typed immediately following the meeting.* This way, information and business is still fresh in the mind of the minute-taker. After typing, minutes should be copied and sent out to members so that they have minutes before the next meeting. A notation should be made of business that was tabled or left unfinished at the last meeting so that they can be placed on the next meeting's agenda.

4) *A good method for highlighting things which individuals stated would be taken care of by the next meeting* is to Use ACTIONS ITEMS, i.e.: "Executive Board will prepare their overview of the educational experience they had at the national APCA Conference in Atlanta by next meeting."

*REMEMBER: Minutes should be filed and brought to each meeting!*

## **F. Evaluation – How to Make Meetings Better Every Time!**

How did we do? Do you ask this after every meeting of your group? If you don't, how do you know how you're doing? There are several compelling reasons to evaluate your meetings:

1) *Timing is crucial to being an effective meeting leader.* Your timing will improve with feedback. You may even want to video a meeting and see how you deal with conflict, how effectively your communication skills relay messages to the membership, and generally how you act as a leader of a meeting!

2) *The more feedback, the better you will become.* Use both written and verbal evaluations from fellow officers, membership and your advisor. Make the information you gained available to the membership so they can see how you honestly care about their opinions. Improve your leadership of the meeting so that they can have effective, efficient and fun meetings.

3) *It helps to ensure follow-up on those issues you promised your fellow board members you would complete.* Are you going to be accountable to your work, or will members doubt you when you make statements or promises? Do you thank special guests or members after meetings? A little kindness goes a long way with groups that have meetings.

## **G. Leadership Skills and the Meeting Presider**

Meeting leaders should ask themselves the following questions:

- *Am I Sensitive to people's needs?*
- *Do I try to meet with members outside of a meeting setting to get to know them more as individuals?*
- *Am I aware of what people can contribute? Do I know what people's strengths and weaknesses are in the organization?*

- *Do I properly involve people utilizing their strengths?*
- *Do I try to involve people in the decision-making process?*

Remember, meetings are made up of individuals! No meeting will be successful if you cannot find a way to include every member in a successful way. You must always remember that the number of roles we fulfill as leaders. Diplomacy and tact are two traits that will get you far as a meeting leader. Ask yourself how you would deal with the following personalities in a meeting.

**a. The Talker**

Who: The “eager beaver” show off, know-it-all.  
 Why: Could be nervous, may be well informed, could be a local.  
 What to do: Don’t embarrass, don’t be sarcastic, but you can disagree (you may be able to use this person.) Slow “the talker” down with tough questions. Interrupt with “that’s an interesting point, what does the rest of the group think?” Let the group take care of him.

**b. The Arguer**

Who: Disagrees with, or corrects everything, “the heckler.”  
 Why: Could be defensive, may have issues, problems we are unaware of.  
 What to do: Don’t argue, keep cool, and keep your group cool. Try to find merit in one of his/her points (honestly), and agree, and move on. If he/she is way off base, toss it to the group. Last resort: Private talk, “What’s wrong?”

**c. The Rambler**

Who: Talker, talks about everything but the topic. Uses analogies that aren’t even close and gets lost.  
 Why: Who knows. Could be scared to come to college or needs to make an impression on the group.  
 What to do: When he/she stops for a breath, say “thank you,” restate any relevant points and move on. “That’s an interesting point, but it’s a little off track, so…”

**d. The Clash**

Who: The two who can’t get along.  
 Why: Personalities, forgot to have their morning coffee.  
 What to do: Emphasize points of agreement, minimize disagreement. Keep the personalities OUT: Refocus on real topic.

**e. The Shy One**

Who: The quiet type, just sits there.  
 Why: They are just shy.  
 What to do: Depends on the why. Ask his/her opinions, or ask those next to him or her to get conversation going. Attempt to bring the person into the discussion but don’t over do it. The group may resent it.

**g. The Buds**

Who: Buddies from high school, class, organization or dorm.  
 Why: They may say: “we all feel the same about this subject,” when in reality it might be one or two people that feel that way.  
 What to do: Involve them in the discussion as individuals.

## H. Common Pitfalls of Meetings

1) *No clear, agreed upon agenda* — We talked about the importance of having a written, pre-meeting agenda for all the members. Groups must agree to go toward a certain goal. As they said in Alice in Wonderland, “If you don’t know where you are going then how will you ever know if you get there?”

2) *Leaving the process of the meeting to fate* — Resist the temptation to change structure of the meeting lightly, no matter what the personal feelings. Separate your authority and the subject matter interest from the process. Facilitate the meeting process by keeping your group on track, on time and in Parliamentary order despite the volatility of the subject at hand or personal feelings. Without the process the meeting can quickly fall apart. (Facilitating comment: “That’s an important consideration. Let’s write that down. I’d like to come back to that after we finish the subject we’re on, okay?”)

3) *Speeding off without a map* — Where does this meeting fit in with the overall plan for dealing with the issue? Take time for planning process. GO SLOW NOW TO GO FAST LATER!!!

4) *Mixing Purposes* — Be clear (by using your agenda) whether you’re planning a procedure (drawing the map) for dealing with a topic, or actually dealing with it. Are you laying out the steps you’ll take or taking a step? One purpose at a time (Facilitating comment: “What are we doing right now?”)

5) *Too many agenda items* — Always ask: “Are these goals realistic within the time frame?” Don’t set up your goal for failure with an unrealistic agenda. (Facilitating comment: “We may not have enough time to deal with all these issues today. Let’s table these less imperative challenges for next time.”)

6) *No mutual agreement on what the problem is.* — (Facilitating comment: “How do you see the problem?” Or “I still don’t have a handle on the real problem. What is it?” Be very careful how you word things. It is wise to be aware of your surroundings as well as your company. Do not be belittling! Respect is earned by being a fair and good leader.)

7) *Jumping in with a solution* — There is a danger in coming in with or arriving at a solution before clearly identifying or agreeing on the problem with the others involved.

8) *Shifting focus* — Stay on the same subject, use the same process. For example, either brainstorm or evaluate ideas, not both at the same time. (Facilitating comment: "Hold on. I think we are talking about two different things. I think they are both important, but let's talk about them one at a time.")

9) *Lack of visual helpers* — Find a way for participants to follow the subject as the meeting proceeds. Use audiovisual helpers to help everyone focus on the content flow.

10) *Unclear or incomplete action items or decision* — Pin down the who, what, where, why and how on the spot! Check out all the agreements made during the meeting at the end of the meeting. (Facilitating comment: "All right, let's review who is doing what by next week's meeting.")

11) *The wrong participants, missing key people* — When agendas have many items, more people need to be there even though they are only involved in one item. (Facilitating comment: "Let’s check that out with \_\_\_\_\_. They can either step in on the meeting or we can schedule a meeting where they can comment on that issue.")

12) *Meeting being dominated by one or two people* — When this occurs pull back and ask someone to facilitate. Don't miss the opportunity to make the most of your staff; make the most of the opportunity to participate yourself, too! (Facilitating comment: "Let's discuss that with the rest of the group... (to another member) do you see it differently?"

13) *Not taking time to assure mutual understanding* — Learn the issues facing other members. Explain your own position. Ask the other people to repeat in their own words what they understand you to be saying. This will head off frustration and reluctance to cooperate. (Facilitating comment: "Oh, your perception is (describe). That's how you see the problem. What would you like to have happen?")

14) *Uneven Preparation* — Varying levels of understanding; Set up a process (perhaps an item on the agenda) whereby all members can be prepared to speak about the issues at the same level of understanding. (Facilitating comment: "Now, let's make sure everyone is up to speed on this subject... ")

15) *Premature Motions* — Don't make a motion until the problem is adequately discussed and analyzed. If you can't agree on the problem, you probably can't agree on the solution (the motion). Premature motions divide the group and create artificial disagreements. (Facilitating comment: "Let's discuss this a little more, I don't think we have a full understanding of all the elements involved yet, and a course of action could be premature.")

## Summary

Always strive to make your meetings efficient and fun. Establish order by utilizing **Robert's Rules of Order** as the rules by which your business in the meeting is conducted. Celebrate birthdays and special events, and find ways keep the meetings interesting to the members. Deal with members during a meeting by treating them as contributing individuals with different points of view. Deal with problem members in appropriate ways, striving to be inclusive and understanding, but firmly enough to keep the meeting on track. Keep accurate, interesting minutes and post them where they can be read easily! Prepare an agenda for each meeting so that you will be more able to conduct business in an orderly fashion, saving member's time.

(Information taken from the APCA Programming Handbook)