

Born to Chair

An Introduction to the Science and Art of Chairing a Board Meeting

Meetings are inevitable. They are the way most people get things done in local government or organizations. As cumbersome and inefficient as they are sometimes, meetings are the most democratic means of sharing and exercising power in a group. Would you rather have a king making decisions for you?

Throughout our communities, small groups make decisions, establish policy, plan functions, and administer programs around a table. In most boards, no one person enjoys any greater voting authority than any other, and no one alone is capable of making a binding decision. Usually that requires the action of a majority of the board. Members know they must persuade others before their ideas can become reality.

Meetings need people to chair them. Strong chairing is essential to the work of a board or committee. Without a chair, there is no direction or order for very long. Boards need chairs to keep them focused on the issue at hand and to bring them to a resolution after the matter has been discussed.

No one is born to chair. Many people have the job of chairing suddenly thrust on them with little or no training or practice, and many times those who hold the office of chair fail to understand the skills necessary to maintain order on a board. Here are some ideas that may work for you:

Whether a Gavel is Necessary

Let's visit a sample meeting. As we come in the door, everybody is talking at once. The chair is banging a wooden hammer on a desk and nobody is listening. That gavel is a symbol of power, but it has earned no one's respect. This is not the model for a meeting.

Across the hall is another meeting. There, a simple pen tap or three in rapid succession is sufficient to regain order. The difference is the makeup of the board, and particularly the body's recognition that in any discussion there must be order. Without order, there is no meeting.

Order comes from a strong leader, one who can bring discussion back to the table and away from disputes between personalities. A good leader does not need a big gavel or a loud voice to rule. The most important attri-

bute is the respect of the board and the board's respect for the chair.

The Choice of a Chair

We choose people to chair our meetings for many wrong reasons. One is longevity. They have been on the board longer than anyone else and have never served as chair before. Another is conviction. No one is as good as they are in standing by their position in the midst of debate. Sometimes people are selected to chair because no one else wants the job.

Choosing the right person to chair is very important. We don't want someone who will try to manipulate the board to fulfill a personal agenda. We don't want someone who will dominate the debate. If anything, we want someone who will remain reserved in discussions. It takes a little distance to maintain order.

We need a leader who will administer the agenda, ensuring that we finish on time, rather than having the meeting run late. After two hours, people get tired; after three, they begin to lose their ability to reason together. Somebody said that in Vermont it isn't a meeting after 10 p.m. By that hour the most productive thing many boards can do is go home to bed.

If you care enough to serve on a board, donating your time to the cause, you owe it to yourself and the organization to ensure that the best person becomes chair. A bad chair can ruin everything. A good chair makes anything possible.

Rules of Order

Robert's Rules of Order is a classic parliamentary guidebook, and many boards adopt it to guide their proceedings. This is usually as far as it goes. Nobody actually

reads Robert's. We turn to it when there is a controversy, fumbling through the sections to find what it says about reconsideration or some other prickly topic no one keeps in their accessible memory.

Robert's is written for the deliberative assembly. Vermont's annual Town Meeting is run by Robert's, but board meetings aren't like Town Meeting at all. Board meetings require greater flexibility and informality than mass meetings. Members speak when they have something to say, rather than waiting to be recognized by the chair. Motions are flung out onto the table without invitation, and most procedural steps that are rigidly enforced at Town Meeting are given short shrift at a board meeting.

This practice is very much in accord with General Robert's manual, if you look at the right chapter. For small boards and commissions of less than twelve, Robert's says the amount of procedural detail depends on the board's own practices. In many boards, chairs are free to make motions, fully participate in discussions, and vote openly, without fear of violating any rules, because the members recognize that a small board needs every member to function properly.

Impartiality

Chairing a meeting requires a certain distance from the proceedings. If two members are arguing over some issue, they will more often respect the chair's call for order or civility if the chair has not taken a position on the matter. This should not prevent the person holding the position of chair from contributing to the discussion.

The role of chair is like a referee or umpire at times, able to stop the action and make a judgment call to enforce the rules of play. At other times, the chair becomes a coach, urging the members to their best behavior, insisting on team play, and encouraging a return to basic skills. To be a successful chair, however, you must at times become team captain, leading the members by example.

This is Vermont, the home of the quiet people. Silence has meaning here. Restraint is a virtue. Even in meetings, it makes sense to hold back at first. Withholding judgment until you've heard partisans on both sides of a debate state their position has its obvious rewards. Learning to listen to what other people say is the beginning of wisdom.

The Progress of Debate

Any discussion ought to start with a simple statement of the problem at hand. "The next item on the agenda is what to do with the old truck."

The agenda is a necessary part of any meeting. It gives members and the public fair notice of what is to be considered. Adding an estimate of the time needed to complete work on the item is also valuable, so members of the public who cannot attend the entire meeting know when to show up. Precision in describing what is to be discussed avoids any criticism that the action was unintended.

Having stated the question, the chair's next action should be to get someone to talk about it. Don't give your opinion first. In fact, let it come last. You have the power to call out a member's name and ask what the member thinks. Go around the table. Then let the discussion begin more generally.

It is the chair's responsibility to state and restate the question at regular intervals, to keep the members on track and away from peripheral or irrelevant subjects. Don't be timid in reminding a member that their concern is not before the board at this time or that their proposed solution is premature until the board has more information.

Coaxing a Motion

There comes a time in every discussion where the board needs to act or move on to something else. The chair should know when this time arrives. Everyone should have had a chance to speak. Questions should have been answered or addressed. Then there is often a lull.

"It sounds as if you believe the truck should be sold," says the chair to the last speaker, the one who seems to have spoken for the majority. "Is that your motion?" The speaker may agree or offer a more specific proposal. Sometimes the chair can simply say, "What is your pleasure on this question?" Sometimes the chair just waits until a speaker makes a declarative statement and says, "That sounds like a motion. Is it?" Whatever it takes to bring closure to debate should be tried.

The Second

Every motion needs a second, except nominations and points of order. A second justifies the motion by showing that at least one other member wants to have it put to a vote. Seconds need to be coaxed out more often than motions. Some motions deserve to die for lack of a second.

After obtaining a second, many boards move swiftly to a vote. This is in reverse order from what Robert's teaches as good meeting practice. The Rules of Order would have the motion put before the board first, followed by discussion, and then the vote. In actual practice, this is often not done, largely because it has been left to the board to formulate a solution to a problem. By the time the motion

is stated and seconded, the board may have made up its mind on what to do.

A good chair will stop between the second and the vote and at least ask whether there is any more discussion. Encouraging a final look before having to say “aye” or “nay” to something is plainly the best policy for any decision maker. Slowing down the progress of the meeting at this instance is as important as moving it forward by asking for a motion earlier in the meeting. Everything deserves one last look.

The Vote

Ask first, “Are you ready for the question?” Skip the formal process of accepting a motion to close off debate at this point. If everybody nods (or better yet, nobody objects), restate the question one more time. “It’s been moved and seconded to sell the old town truck. All in favor say ‘aye.’ Opposed, ‘nay.’ The motion passes.”

Get used to saying those words. Repeat them to yourself in the car on your way to the meeting, and afterward when driving home. You should not have to think about what to say at the moment of truth, because you need to be paying attention to how the vote goes.

That, too, is the chair’s responsibility. With three or five members, this should be easy. With seven or more, the voting needs to be more formal, either by roll call vote (asking each member their vote in turn) or raising of hands, in order to provide greater reliability, at least on close questions. Where there is general agreement on a decision, voice vote will do in any size meeting. A unanimous vote is not difficult to count.

Sometimes members don’t vote when the ayes and nays are called. This may be caused by uncertainty or a lack of attention on the member’s part. Don’t let this happen. Insist on a vote either way, or an abstention if the member insists after giving a reason for abstaining.

Good Minutes

Make sure the person taking the minutes gets the vote as well as the precise wording of the motion and any amendments. Memories fade. Meeting memories fade even faster. Boards forget what they have decided, and sometimes make the mistake of revisiting the same issue, disguised as something else, without realizing what they are doing.

This is why we need good, timely, and accessible minutes. For public boards, the law requires them to be ready within five days of the meeting. Good practice insists that they be reviewed by the members and approved at the

next meeting. The best boards keep index cards of the subjects of the decisions they make, in order to know how prior boards have handled the questions.

Good minutes should contain the names of all who participate in the meeting, all motions and votes, and a summary of the discussion for each item discussed. Not everything said needs to be reported. The key is to be able to see at a glance what happened, in two or three pages, without the need to refer to other records. Keep them secure and in order as permanent records of the board.

Dealing With the Unruly

Most meetings are so orderly they become boring. In rare instances, disorder breaks out and makes us yearn for the boring meetings we used to hate.

Conflict is inevitable with some people and some issues. Knowing how to manage it, without unnaturally stifling the debate that needs to follow or risking the premature adjournment of the meeting by members who find the conflict too disturbing, is among the most difficult challenges a chair can face.

The chair is obliged to maintain order, even in heated situations. Order is more important then. When things are at their most volatile, the board is best served by greater formality. This includes enforcing the rule that members must be recognized by the chair to speak and that the direction of the discussion should head toward the chair rather than across the table member to member.

The skills of a good chair include balancing the time between two advocates, swinging the board’s attention from one to the other, and even organizing the discussion by asking opponents to respond to questions from the chair, with each having to answer the same questions. Sometimes a short recess following an emotional exchange helps cool the board members down and restore order.

The issue may be too hotly contested to resolve that night. A week or a month later, no issue is as controversial or as difficult to resolve. Time is an anti-inflammatory agent, and delay is often the best prescription.

Including the Public

If you serve on a public board, you know that people will attend your meetings and they have a right to have their say. Vermont law requires every public board to reserve some time on its agenda for public comment on any subject within the jurisdiction of the body. Beyond that, it is never a bad idea to invite the public to participate in your discussions, as long as order is maintained.

Nobody has all the answers, and fresh ideas are often more likely to come from outsiders than those close to an issue. Sometimes sitting on a board blinds you to the wisdom of other alternatives or the impact of your decision on individuals.

Another reason to invite public comment is to avoid the accusation that those who make the decision have only their own agenda to direct them. People need to see how difficult it is to make hard choices. Those with a stake in the outcome of any particular discussion will find even disagreeable decisions easier to digest if they have a chance to speak at the meeting and to see the decision made.

Running a Hearing

Some meetings require a higher degree of formality than others. When the board sits as a panel of judges to award damages, assess fines, discipline employees, or take any other quasi-judicial action, the greatest degree of procedural care is required. When the rights of individuals are at risk, you have to pay attention to detail. Fairness is always the most important quality of such meetings.

A hearing requires more control of the proceeding by the chair, and more order. The chair ought to direct every stage of the proceeding, from the swearing in of witnesses to the presentation of evidence. Sometimes the chair must rule on objections and motions. Sometimes a chair will need to rule a member or other person out of order to restore peace during a hostile hearing.

If no rules exist for the conduct of a hearing, the board should adopt them, informally if necessary, before the proceeding begins. Give the parties some structure, so that they can know how the hearing will run—who will bear the burden of going first, what evidence is relevant, and how deliberations will be conducted, among other issues. The chair also has a continuing obligation to explain how the hearing will work and what comes next.

Following a hearing comes a decision. Be careful to avoid

reaching that decision until the hearing is over. Try to separate the hearing itself into two parts, the first concentrating on the facts and the second on the law or procedure that is given to the board to apply to the facts. Keeping all three parts (evidence, law, and decision) separate improves decision-making and helps ensure fairness for everyone.

Keeping It Together

Fractious meetings create scar tissue on the combatants. Keeping the debate civil can avoid hard feelings later on. As chair, learn how to steer the discussion away from personalities and toward ideas. Help the members distinguish between their reaction to somebody's ideas and that person's character.

Nothing is more important than the cultivation of civility in a meeting. At its best a board is more than the sum of its parts, but if the parts are chafed and raw from rubbing against each other, only trouble will follow. While debate rages, keep the members focused on the issue at hand. After the issue has passed, find ways of restoring the dignity of the meeting and the respect each member ought to have for every other member. Sometimes a ten-minute break is the smartest next move. Humor will save you when nothing else will.

Meetings That Work

Meetings that work are miraculous; those that fail are unnecessarily boring, hostile, and detrimental to members' spirits. The difference between meetings that work and meetings that don't is often the result of a well-prepared leader. A good chair listens. A good chair encourages civility and respect. A good chair maintains order and enough procedure to keep the meeting running smoothly. It takes work and it takes practice, but you can do it. Then they'll say, "You were born to chair." You'll know it's not true, that you had to learn how to run the meeting, but let that be our little secret.

The Vermont Institute for Government

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workshops, and collaborating on a variety of trainings and educational events for Vermont's town officers and citizens.

This pamphlet is one in a series of VIG publications on Vermont local issues. For more information and additional resources, please visit the Vermont Institute for Government website: vtinstituteforgovt.org.

Please note: This pamphlet was revised and updated in the spring of 2020. Changes in the law subsequent to that date may make some of what is written here no longer valid. Always check the latest versions of the law before proceeding.