



Preparation and Techniques to Avoid Meeting Chaos - The Body's Duties

Daniel Foth, JD, Local Government Specialist, Local Government Center, UW-Madison, Division of Extension

This month's focus is on responsibilities that governmental body members ("members") have when attending a meeting of that governmental body (the "Body"). The chair and members of a governmental body share responsibility for holding a productive meeting and avoiding chaos.

The first meeting rule is for each member to be civil. The book *Strategic Doing* states, "Rules of civility are one important component of establishing an environment where trust can flourish! With civility, a person can speak and know that others would listen to their ideas."¹

The second rule for productive meetings is preparation. Before the meeting, a member should carefully review the agenda and supporting materials. If they have questions, they should seek information before the meeting from the administrator, clerk, or their designee. The number one complaint I hear is, "Members show up unprepared for meetings." Because of this, they ask uninformed questions, and generally make a mess of the meeting.

A third issue is meeting attentiveness. For example, using your electronic device indicates you're not paying attention. Further, texting other Body members with comments (potentially a private meeting) could result in an open meetings law violation. The best advice is to mute and stay off personal cell phones and electronic devices. As the meeting continues, keep pace with the agenda. Doing so will help the Body focus on each agenda item and move the meeting forward.

A fourth issue is meeting decorum. Members should arrive at every meeting on time. During the meeting, listen to others, as you would expect each member to listen to you. If you have accepted any responsibility for research or information gathering, do so in a timely fashion. Be diligent in your research and prepare your comments utilizing all of the information received, not just that which supports your viewpoint. You should be able to make the best decisions possible, using all the available facts.

The Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (RONR) approach is to use a formality and decorum to keep the debate/discussion from becoming

personal (RONR 11th Ed. Pgs. 22-25 & 393). Once recognized and speaking to the motion (RONR 11th Ed. Pgs. 29-30), a member must always address all comments to the chair. Keep your comments focused on the motion's merits and relevant to the topic at hand. Do not use insults, vulgarity, or inflammatory language. RONR refers to this as refraining from actions that "disturb the assembly" (RONR 11th Ed. Pgs. 391-393). Be mindful that under RONR, a member has the right to speak to an issue only twice, and for no more than ten (10) minutes each. Also, a member should avoid speaking against her or his motion, but if seconding another's motion, s/he may speak against it. The difference is that by making a second, a member is indicating an interest to discuss the motion, not favor it (RONR 11th Ed. Pgs. 387-90 & 391-393).

Avoid making "negative" motions such as "I move not to allow the Clerk to buy staples." What happens if this motion passes? Nothing. And worse, it may add confusion as to the result. Use a positive approach to avoid an ambiguous outcome (RONR 11th Ed. Pgs. 104-105). While addressing comments to the chair,

members should avoid giving a personal opinion, or attacking another member's motives or their characteristics (RONR 11th Ed. Pg. 43).

Remember, RONR's purpose is to *facilitate discussion, not to obstruct it*, and to ensure courtesy to all. Thus, each proposition is entitled to full, free debate and discussion, prioritizing substance over the process. RONR facilitates full discussion participation through its guidance about the types of remarks and methods for making them. For instance, a member must seek recognition from

the chair before making any comments. Once recognized, if making a motion, start with "I move that _____" (RONR 11th Ed, Pgs. 32-33).

Remember that discussion cannot start until the motion is seconded (RONR 11th Ed. Pg. 35), and the chair restates the motion (RONR 11th Ed. Pg. 37).

Now the motion belongs to the Body and can be discussed. I use the term "discuss" versus "debate." While RONR uses "debate," I find that "debate" implies there must be a winner and a loser. Civil discussion leads to a resolution based on

informed information leading to the best course of action.

Finally, remember the number one rule of civility, the Golden Rule: Treat other people the way you would like to be treated. Doing so will keep your meetings running smoothly and effectively.

1. Morrison, Hutcheson, Nilsen, Fadden & Franklin, *Strategic Doing*, 2019.



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