

How to Preside - Preparation and Techniques to Avoid Meeting Chaos and Discord - Part 2

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This month's article covers: Keeping members and discussion on track, on the merits, and what to do when a member is out of order.

Motion Discussion - How to Keep a Member(s) and the Discussion on Track

The chair's most important role is to keep the meeting on track. The chair can ensure that each member's focus is on the current agenda item by announcing each agenda item formally. The chair should seek to involve each member on each agenda item discussion, helping each member keep focused, as they may have something to contribute to the discussion.

When a member's comments appear to be off topic, the chair can ask, "Member X, can you help me understand how your comment is related to the motion on the floor?" The member's response will determine if her/his comment is related. It may be that the comment relates to a bigger question that no one has considered.

If the member is off topic, the chair could note that the body will consider the

member's comment at a later discussion, helping the member understand that her/his comment will be heard later and not lost. This approach helps the chair guide the discussion, keeping the focus on problem solving and agreeing to address a specific topic later.¹

If the discussion starts to involve multiple discussion items, treat each discussion like a motion amendment. That is, discuss each item, one at a time. This approach also helps the chair work with the members to find a resolution, maintain order, and move the motion forward.²

Motion Discussion - How to Keep the Discussion to the Merits and not Personal Speaking

In the heat of a discussion, a member may focus their comment(s) on the member making or opposing the motion instead of the motion's merit. As chair, you control the discussion. Maintaining discussion formalities is a good way to minimize personality conflicts. The chair should insist that each member address his/her questions and comments to the chair. Members should avoid using the names of other members when

speaking. Instead of saying, "I think Joe or Ms. Jones is flat wrong," the chair could suggest a member say, "I disagree with the member (or previous speaker) because ..." ³ Advising members to keep their comments neutral and avoid inflammatory statements will help avoid personal conflicts. For example, if a member responds to another member's statement saying, "that last point is crazy," the chair could suggest the member rephrase their comment to "that last point doesn't make sense to me." Such suggestions may help avoid conflict between body members and keep the discussion to the merits.⁴

Motion Discussion - How to Handle a Member Who is Out of Order

To expedite business and maintain order, the chair may need to inform a member that s/he is "out of order." Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (11th ed.) (RONR), p. 449-450. A good practical approach is to take the member aside and discuss their meeting conduct privately. Remind the member, referring to the body's rules, what their behavior should be. Should the member persist,

then use the body's rules to keep the member in line.

For a minor breach, the chair may tap the gavel, note the fault, then advise the member to avoid it. For further violations, the chair may first warn the member and, next, note the member is out of order. The last resort is for the chair to "name the member" for further discipline by the body.⁵

When ruling a member's comments out of order, the chair should keep the ruling professional and low key and, to maintain civility, kindly explain why the member's comments are out of order. If it is possible, let the member know what they might do to change their comment(s) to remain in order.

For example, during a motion discussion to purchase a computer, a member might state the need to redecorate the office.

The chair should gently interrupt the member and note that the issue at hand is the purchase of a computer. Let the member know if s/he wants to discuss the redecorating of the office that would need a separate discussion. Perhaps then suggest adding that topic to the next month's meeting agenda.

1. Adapted from Nancy Sylvester, "Control the debate, control the meeting." American Bar Association, Leadership Institute, Summer 2011.

2. Adapted from Roger Schwarz, "Five Ways Meetings Get Off Track and How to Prevent Each One."

3. RONR, Pgs. 392-3.

4. RONR *In Brief*, Pgs. 31-32.

5. RONR Pgs. 645-646.



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