

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

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 fung 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

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