

# Control the debate, control the meeting: Answers to your parliamentary questions

At the 2012 ABA Bar Leadership Institute, one of the workshops had some questions that were submitted in writing and that the speaker was not able to answer due to time constraints. Because the questions were regarding parliamentary procedure and meeting management, I have been asked to address them.

All four of the questions dealt with the debate portion in the processing of a motion in a board meeting. As you can guess, bar associations are not the only organizations whose boards have problems making the discussion portion of the meeting effective, efficient, and focused.

Before I begin answering the questions that were asked, there are a few general rules pertaining to debate that apply to all four of them. When you adopt *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 11th Edition* as your parliamentary authority, you have some debate rules already in place.

## Let Robert's be your guide

For example, a member who desires to speak in debate must first be recognized by the chair. The general rule is that the chair calls on the first person who seeks recognition (e.g., raises his or her hand), and that continues throughout the meeting.

That is why when I am chairing a board meeting, I always have a pad of paper and pen close at hand. I instruct the members that if they wish to speak, to please raise their hand and make

direct eye contact with me to ensure that I have written down their name. I write the names down in the order they seek recognition. Then I go down the list and call on people.

*Robert's* does, of course, have special circumstances that can apply to the order in which the chair calls on members to speak. There are three principles that override the rule that says the order of seeking recognition is the order in which the chair calls on the members:

If the member who made the motion seeks recognition and has not yet spoken on the motion, then that member should be called on next, even if he or she was not the first to seek recognition.

No member is entitled to be called on to speak a second time in debate on the same motion until everyone who is seeking recognition has had his or her first opportunity to speak.

The chair should alternate between those speaking in favor of the motion and those speaking in opposition to the motion. That can simply be done by saying, "The last speaker spoke in favor of the motion. Is there anyone seeking recognition to speak against the motion?" If there is more than one, go to the list you created to see who among those wanting to speak in opposition is at the top of the list.

Another *Robert's* rule pertaining to

debate is that a member can't speak more than two times on any one motion on any one day—and again, he or she can't speak the second time until everyone who wishes to has spoken the first time.

Unless the other members give permission to extend it, a member's speaking time must stay within the limits set by the rules of the board. If the board has no rules on the length of speech, *Robert's* sets the limit at 10 minutes.

Debate must be limited to the merits of the specific motion that is being debated, not the general subject. If both a main motion and an amendment to that motion are on the floor, the discussion must be limited to the amendment. After the amendment is voted on, the discussion will then be limited only to the main motion as amended (if the amendment has passed).

With those general debate rules in mind, let's examine the specific questions asked at BLI.

## *How do you structure board meetings to make sure introverted members have equal chance to offer views?*

The debate rules already referred to are a tremendous help in this area. If a person has not yet spoken and others have, when the one who has not spoken raises a hand to seek recognition, he or she automatically goes ahead of anyone on the list who has already spoken.

Again, I have the written list of names in front of me because as you get into the meeting, it is hard to remember if that person has already spoken on this particular motion, or if that was the last motion that they spoke on. So, if John is seeking recognition and Joe's hand goes up, I simply look down on my list to see if John has already spoken on this motion (if so, his name will be crossed off the list), and if he has, Joe gets called on before him.

There are some other techniques that can sometimes be used to draw out those introverts. If it is obviously going to be a controversial issue, the chair may choose to announce that he or she will go around the room and ask



Nancy Sylvester

each person, in order, to give his or her thoughts. This method ensures that the introverts get to speak on the issue. Do not begin with an introvert. Call first on the person who made the motion so the introverts get a little bit of time to think about what they want to say.

During debate, there are two techniques that have been effective—one subtle, the other one overt. Direct eye contact toward the introverted member during the debate can be seen as encouragement to speak. Obviously, the direct eye contact must be subtle so no one else realizes what you are doing, and so the introverted person isn't embarrassed. But it does work—besides using this technique in board meetings, I effectively used it in my 31 years of college teaching.

A more overt method is to make a statement that encourages the introvert to speak. The statement may sound something like this: "Some of you have not spoken on this issue. We would love to hear your opinion. Is there anyone who has not yet spoken who is willing to share your ideas with us?" Frequently, a statement like this is enough to remind those who have spoken a lot that the quiet members have something of value to say.

#### *How do you close down discussion on a tough issue and move it to a vote when people are just repeating what they already said?*

Following the debate rules given at the beginning of this article will assist with this problem, too. Also, when the debate is dragging on and on and on, it's up to the presiding officer to help move it along.

Let's say that the motion on the floor is to purchase a computer, and the issue has been debated for 45 minutes. In addition, members are beginning to stray off topic just a bit. The presiding officer can move things along by making any of the following statements:

"Is there any further discussion on the motion to purchase a computer?"

"Please limit your discussion to the

specific motion, which is to purchase a computer."

"We've heard many good points of view but are beginning to repeat some of the same ideas. Are there any new opinions on the motion to purchase a computer?"

"Please limit your comments to new opinions."

"We have heard a lot of very good discussion; are you ready for the vote?"

Another way to reduce extraneous debate is to recognize alternate sides when speaking. After someone has spoken in favor of the motion, before calling on the next person, simply ask, "Is there anyone who would like to speak against the motion?" Alternating between an affirmative speaker and a negative speaker sometimes helps reduce the debate, especially when the debate has been rather one-sided. When the presiding officer asks if anyone wants to speak against the motion and no one, or very few, raise their hands, and then the presiding officer asks if anyone wants to speak in favor of the motion, most of the time, fewer or no hands go up. This is because it's obvious that the motion is going to pass even without further affirmative comments.

Here's another tip: Before the debate begins, the chair can get agreement from the members to set a time limit for debate on this particular motion. This, along with the rule that a person cannot speak a second time until everyone who wishes to speak a first time has done so, works very effectively.

#### *How do you deal with a board member who just likes to hear himself or herself talk? Or who wanders off topic to raise issues that are off the agenda and that cannot be addressed by the board?*

Setting a specific time limit for each speech, one that is more realistic than the 10 minutes set by *Robert's*, can be very helpful here. I prefer three to five minutes. As a communications professor at the college level, I have heard thousands of speeches in the three- to five-minute time length. When a person has

organized his or her thoughts, almost anything can be covered in that time.

Time limits can be set in your standing rules, in the rules for a specific meeting, or right before debate begins on a specific motion. Remember, if time limits are set, it is the chair's responsibility to adhere to them—so get a timekeeper to help.

When the member is wandering off topic, the chair should interrupt the speaker and remind him or her of the specific subject that is being addressed. When members are just beginning to wander off topic, use the calling of the next speaker as a reminder to stay on topic. It might sound like this: "The next speaker on the subject of purchasing a computer is ..."

#### *How do you handle situations where there is a board member with a very strong personality who tends to take discussions in directions that are not productive?*

There's an old saying that goes something like this: "It isn't what you say, but how you say it." That has never been truer than in ruling comments of a member to be out of order. Calling a member to order is one of those times when your communication skills will be tested. Don't just rule the comments of the member out of order; instead, explain why the comments are out of order and how the member can do what he or she wants to do and still be in order.

So, while discussing the motion to purchase a computer, if the member starts talking about the need to redecorate the office, the chair should kindly interrupt the speaker and remind him or her that the only issue that is appropriate to discuss at this time is the purchase of a computer. Then remind the speaker that should he or she want to discuss the redecorating of the office, that would have to be a separate motion that would be brought up under New Business.

Keeping the debate process moving in a fair and equitable manner takes a lot of skill and tact on the part of the chair. The methods outlined in this article

can assist the chair in controlling debate so that the entire meeting is controlled.

—By Nancy Sylvester,  
MA, PRP, CPP-T

*Nancy Sylvester has a master's degree in communication from the University of Michigan and is professor emeritus of*

*speech at Rock Valley College. Nancy has been a practicing professional parliamentarian since 1980 and is the first person to serve her professional organization, the National Association of Parliamentarians, as NAP Parliamentarian for two terms.*

*She is the author of two books published by Alpha Books, a division of Penguin Group: The Complete Idiot's Guide*

*to Robert's Rules and The Guerrilla Guide to Robert's Rules. She is also the author of the booklet The Basics of Parliamentary Procedure. She has been a presenter at the ABA Bar Leadership Institute every year since 2005. More about Nancy and parliamentary procedure can be found on her website: [www.nancysylvester.com](http://www.nancysylvester.com).*