

Nancy Sylvester, MA, PRP, CPP-T

THERE ARE PROFESSIONAL PARLIAMENTARIANS!?!

When I tell people that I am a professional parliamentarian, they look at me like they think I just told them I have some strange, incurable disease. After I assure them that it is not a disease, I then proceed to explain the profession. Just in case you did not know there are such creatures as professional parliamentarians out there, let me explain my profession to you.

What is one? A professional parliamentarian is an expert in parliamentary procedure and is hired by a person or an organization to give advice on matters of parliamentary law and procedure. A professional parliamentarian is qualified to assist the organization or the individual in the application of parliamentary procedure, thus improving the effectiveness of their meetings.

A professional parliamentarian can help assure that your convention, membership meeting, board meeting, or stockholder meeting is conducted smoothly and efficiently. As a consultant, the professional parliamentarian can advise the presiding officer, the organization, and the individual members on the application of parliamentary procedure for the orderly conduct of the business of the association.

Just like other professionals, parliamentarians belong to one or more professional organizations and are bound by a code of ethics. They come to your organization as an objective expert, thus assisting the group in a way that no member of the organization can.

Parliamentary Designations. Behind the name of a professional parliamentarian you will see some letters. Those letters indicate to you the level of professional designation that person holds. There are two national organizations and each has multiple designations.

The National Association of Parliamentarians (NAP) has two levels of parliamentary proficiency, thus two levels of designations.

- An *RP* is a Registered Parliamentarian and has successfully passed a registration examination that consists of multiple choice questions based on the current edition of *Robert's*.
- A *PRP* is a Professional Registered Parliamentarian who has not only passed the RP exam but has also completed a course of lectures and hand-on training in the skills necessary for a professional parliamentarian. In order to maintain the PRP designation a member must, every six years, successfully complete the Professional Development Course and additional required professional activities.

DESIGNATIONS:

RP is a Registered Parliamentarian through the National Association of Parliamentarians (NAP)

PRP is a Professional Registered Parliamentarian through NAP

CP is a Certified Parliamentarian through the American Institute of Parliamentarians (AIP)

CPP is a Certified Professional Parliamentarian through AIP

CP-T is a Certified Teacher of Parliamentary Procedure through AIP

CPP-T is a Certified Professional Teacher of Parliamentary Procedure through AIP

The American Institute of Parliamentarians (AIP) has three levels of designations.

- A *CP* is a Certified Parliamentarian and has successfully passed a written examination that is based not only on the current edition of *Robert's*, but also on other authorities, including: *Sturgis Standard Code of Procedure*, *Demeter's Manual of Parliamentary Law and Procedure*, and *Fundamentals of Parliamentary Law and Procedure*.
- A *CPP* is a Certified Professional Parliamentarian and has successfully completed an oral examination before a panel of national parliamentarians. The examination is based on the same books as the *CP* examination. Additionally points are needed that demonstrate an active participation in the profession.
- A designated Teacher of Parliamentary Procedure (*CP-T* or *CPP-T*) is an advanced certification offered by AIP. To attain this designation a member must have successfully completed a teacher education course offered by Education Department of the American Institute of Parliamentarians and must show evidence of at least 15 hours of successful teaching experience.

In order to maintain the *CP* and *CPP* designations a member must, every 7 years, complete approved continuing education requirements.

Role of Parliamentarian

The professional parliamentarian can serve you and your organization in many different capacities. The role of a parliamentarian is to serve as an impartial advisor.

Impartial is the hallmark of a true professional. It is of utmost importance for the parliamentarian to stay out of the issue and stay into the procedure. A good parliamentarian is able to advise both “sides” on an issue, because the rules are the same no matter which “side” you are on.

A good parliamentarian is able to make sure that the focus of the meeting is on the issues, not parliamentary procedure. Members should not spend time in a meeting debating parliamentary procedure; the debate time is for the issues.

In a interview for the position of national parliamentarian for an organization, I was asked “What is the most important job of the parliamentarian?”

I answered that the job of the parliamentarian was to make the presiding officer look good. The more I explained my answer, the more I realized how descriptive the statement was.

At first blush that answer sounds like the interest of the parliamentarian is in the presiding officer, usually the president. Not so! If the presiding officer looks good the following benefits are reaped by the entire organization.

- All members are heard and feel like the meeting was run fairly
- A good leader doesn't have to know everything, just be surrounded by people who do. So the fact that I make the leader appear to know what he or she is doing is a sign that the leader is exercising excellent leadership and facilitation skills
- When the confidence of the members in their leader is high, that confidence contributes to a well-run meeting.

Parliamentarians don't rule

Don't ask about the ruling of the parliamentarian! The parliamentarian does not rule. The parliamentarian is an advisor and therefore makes no final decisions. The parliamentarian may give an interpretation of a rule, an opinion on a rule, or even be asked to cite a rule, but never rules!

Part of the basis of the reason a parliamentarian does not rule is that the only person who can rule is the chair of the meeting. If you disagree with the ruling of the chair, then you have an avenue to deal with that disagreement, it is called the motion to Appeal from the Decision of the Chair. Notice there is no motion to Appeal from the Decision of the Parliamentarian. That is because the parliamentarian does not make decisions.

When and how to hire a Professional

The answer to the question of when to hire a professional parliamentarian is similar to the answer of when to hire any other professional, whether it be a doctor, lawyer, or accountant. You may not need to hire a parliamentarian when it is a small group getting together for social or professional reasons. But, once the group is large or the problems you are facing are difficult, then it may be the time to call on a professional. One clear red flag is when members are feeling that their rights are being infringed. Another clear red flag is when the minority appears to be running the show.

There are many different approaches to hiring a professional parliamentarian. Some organizations hire a parliamentarian that is located in or near the convention city and hire a different parliamentarian each year. Other organizations hire the same parliamentarian year after year and that parliamentarian travels to the convention site each time.

I have taught parliamentary procedure to parliamentarians with another professional parliamentarian. She is from Orlando, Florida and I am from Rockford, Illinois. When

explaining the different approaches to hiring a parliamentarian, we frequently joked that she is a one night stand parliamentarian and I am a long term relationship parliamentarian. An explanation will be very helpful here!

One Night Stand. When a parliamentarian lives in a city that has many conventions, he or she will frequently serve an organization for the one time that they are in or near the city of the parliamentarian's residence. Thus, the title of one-night stand seems appropriate. Orlando is a convention city, so it is not unusual for her to be called upon by an organization to serve as the parliamentarian for their convention that is being held in Orlando.

Long-Term Relationships. Parliamentarians who live in a city which is not a convention city would have a problem depending only on the professional work that is available in their community. For example, while Rockford is a wonderful city, it is not a convention city. My business as a professional parliamentarian depends upon my traveling with my clients. Therefore, most of my clients are long-term relationships. I serve the client throughout the year, serving all of their parliamentary needs, and then travel with them to their convention city.

Advantages/Disadvantages. There are both advantages and disadvantages to each of these. The one night stand is frequently cheaper for the organization since the organization does not have to pay travel expenses. The long-term relationship is in many ways advantageous to the organization since the parliamentarian knows the organization and understands how it works. Every organization has its own personality and it many times takes awhile to understand the personality of the group.

In an on-going relationship with a client, the parliamentarian many times has a longer history with an organization than the current officers do. For example, I have been national parliamentarian for one of my organizations for over 23 years. That is much longer than many of the members have been involved in the organization.