

The Presiding Officer's Impact on Closure to Controversial Decisions

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For years, when training in presiding skills I have made a statement, followed by the comment that someday I am going to prove that statement scientifically, and then write an article supporting it. I still have not found a method to do the research, but have decided that the time has come to write the article. The statement is that, particularly in the case of a highly controversial motion, when the presiding officer does a thorough job of Steps 3, 5, and 6 of processing a motion [*Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 10th edition (RONR)*, pp. 31-51], the assembly is much more likely to accept the outcome of the vote and move on to the next issue. While I don't have proof, I do have empirical evidence to support the statement, based upon years of observation as a professional parliamentarian. I will support the statement in this article by reviewing the six steps of processing a motion, and looking closely at Steps 3, 5, and 6, including an examination of the effect of those three steps on the assembly's response to the vote.

Experienced parliamentarians are aware of the clarity with which *RONR* explains the processing of a motion. That clarity is assisted by breaking it down into six steps:

1. A member makes the motion.
2. Another member seconds the motion.
3. The chair states the question on the motion.
4. Members debate the motion.
5. The chair puts the question to a vote.
6. The chair announces the result of the vote

When training presiding officers, I always emphasize Steps 3, 5, and 6, because they are the most crucial steps from the perspective of the presiding officer. It is the appropriate handling of those three steps that separates a great presiding officer from the others. A review of those three steps will help support my theory regarding their impact on the assembly's ability to have closure on controversial issues.

Step 3 is important because it is the beginning of the presiding officer's efforts to focus the assembly on the specific motion that is to be discussed. The statement of the motion by the presiding officer is a clear indication to all that *that* specific motion, in its exact wording, is the only issue now open for discussion. Clear statement of the motion in Step 3 makes it easier for the chair in Step 4 to keep the discussion focused on the exact motion stated. If, as many times happens, the chair, instead of restating the entire motion, only states the subject of the motion condensed to a short phrase, then Step 4 is likely to lose clarity and focus. During Step 4, the discussion will potentially deteriorate from a focused discussion of the phrase stated by the chair to a discussion of anything that is even remotely related to the subject.

Step 3 is also important because the conclusion of this step is the point in time when the ownership of the motion is transferred from the member who made the motion to the assembly. That distinction is so very important, because it has an impact on the maker's ability to change or withdraw the motion.

Just as Step 3 is important so that specific parameters of the discussion are extremely clear during Step 4, Step 5 is important because it ensures that all members of the assembly understand exactly what they are voting on. If Step 5 is not properly executed by the chair, a universal scene will unfold: the chair says "Those in favor of the motion . . ." and all at once several of the assembly will duck down, cup one hand over their mouth, turn their head to the member sitting next to them, and ask in a rushed manner, "What are we voting on now?"

It is even more important for the chair to state the motion about to be voted on when it is controversial. It has appeared to me in many such situations that when the motion is clearly and objectively stated just before the vote, it has a settling effect on the assembly. It is as if everyone feels that the issue is about to be resolved using a fair, democratic process.

Step 6 is an extremely important step in the proper processing of a motion, controversial or not. *RONR* (10th ed.), p. 46, gives the content of the complete announcement by the chair, which includes:

1. The report of the vote, including the count if the vote was counted.
2. Declaration of whether the motion is adopted or lost.
3. Statement of the effect of the vote or, if appropriate, ordering its execution.
4. Announcement of the next item of business (which, in the case of a secondary motion, includes the next motion that is pending).

Proper execution of Step 6 is always important, but it is crucial in controversial situations. It is as if this step gives the assembly permission to move on to the next issue, instead of rehashing the current issue.

I first noticed the importance of step 6 at a meeting I attended as a member of an organization in 1978. At the annual meeting there was a motion regarding the major fundraiser for the upcoming year. There was much controversy because many of the members did not agree with the top proposal, but they knew the organization needed to have a major fundraiser and they did not have a better suggestion. When the chair called for the voice vote, very few members voted. The vote was a majority, and the chair's declaration of the vote consisted of: "Uhhh, it passed." Then there was a long pause as the chair determined what to do next. During the time of that long pause, the noise level in the room began to rise, as people who voted against the motion, or didn't vote at all, were beginning to complain about the decision. That was the start of a long process of complaining about the decision, which lasted until after the fundraiser was complete, many months later.

The fundraiser was marginally successful, mainly because of a lack of support by the members. The members sold far fewer tickets than had been sold in previous years. I have always believed that the fundraiser would have been more successful if the meeting where it was approved had gone differently. If the presiding officer had done a thorough job of announcing the results of the vote, it is quite likely that the negativity would never have started, and the fundraiser would have had a much greater chance of success.

On a side note, it was soon after that I learned one of the uses of the motion "Division of the Assembly" was to require members to vote by standing in support of or opposition to the motion, thus forcing them to state their commitment to the motion overtly. I always wished I had realized the use of that motion at the time, because I would have stood and called out "Division of the Assembly" and possibly impacted the follow-up support of the decision.

Because of that specific vote and my observation of the impact of the announcement of the results, I have been very observant of the influence of Step 6 on organizations I have served. Repeatedly I have witnessed, to varying degrees, that when the presiding officer appropriately executes Steps 3, 5, and 6, the assembly is better able to accept the decision and then move on to the next item on the agenda. I have also frequently observed that when a presiding officer did not appropriately execute Steps 3, 5, and particularly 6, in controversial situations, the assembly appeared to dwell on the decision and tried repeatedly to rehash it.

While I have no scientific research to support my theory, my years of observation and professional parliamentary work seems to support it. It is as if the proper execution of those three steps in the motion-making process has a calming effect on the members who did not vote on the prevailing side, and allows them to accept the decision of the assembly. I sometimes wonder if the reason for that acceptance is that the members who did not get their way at least felt like the process was fair and therefore are more accepting of the outcome. Whatever the reason, proper execution of Steps 3, 5, and, particularly 6, appears to assist the assembly in having closure on their controversial decision.

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