

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE MEETING MANAGEMENT Facilitating Discussion

A review of the research on the number of hours a week spent in meetings for the average business person ranges from 3 hours to 25% of the work week. My experience as a professional parliamentarian indicates that whether it is the local city council meeting, school board meeting, or board meeting of a nonprofit organization, the number one complaint I hear is that the meetings are too long.

All of this evidence indicates that every one of us could use some assistance in meeting management. I decided to write this series of articles that cover three strategies for effective meeting management: effective chairing of the meeting, facilitating discussion, and meeting follow-up. The article on the effective chairing of the meeting can be found on my website at:

http://www.nancysylvester.com/docs/Resources/articles/effective_chairing_meeting2.html. This second article will cover facilitating discussion.

Discussion by the meeting attendees is a crucial part of the decision making process. A good, healthy discussion leads to a greater number of solutions to a problem and assists in the vetting of the various solutions which helps the group reach better decisions.

The basis of effective leadership in a democratic decision making process is that the leader facilitates the discussion. Effective leaders facilitate the discussion; ineffective leaders dominate the discussion and take control of the direction of the discussion. This article will cover the leader facilitating discussion during a meeting which includes facilitate, don't dictate; keep the discussion focused; focus on the will of the attendees; and religiously follow speaking rules.

Facilitate, don't dictate! The difference between a leader who facilitates a meeting and one who dictates a meeting is enormous. The leader who facilitates is focused on the meeting process and helping the group focus on the outcome that the group believes is best. A leader who dictates usually believes that he or she knows more than the group does. That type of leader typically begins the meeting with the outcome in mind that the leader believes is best and focuses the entire meeting on getting the group to that outcome.

The gavel is used in parliamentary meetings and thus has become the symbol for

the chair of a meeting. Notice that the symbol for the leader is a gavel, which represents fairness and justice, not a crown which represents royalty. Some people have trouble handling the sudden “power” that comes with serving as presiding officer. It is imperative that the meeting attendees see the chair as fair in the handling of the meeting. My experience over the years of attending meetings is that the members will forgive mistakes made by the chair, but they have trouble forgiving a chair who is unfair.

Rules are an important part of the meeting process. The chair should not serve as a dictator by either creating the rules or deciding which rules should be followed. Instead, the chair should facilitate the attendees deciding the rules and then should make sure that everyone is aware of the rules the group has decided to follow. This means that the chair follows the rules, just like everyone else.

One of the greatest wastes of meeting time is discussion that rambles and gets off task. As a facilitator of the meeting, the leader must keep the discussion focused. All of us have attended an unnecessarily long rambling meeting, so we have seen keeping the discussion focused is difficult. It requires discipline from the meeting chair as well as the meeting attendees. Most discussion during a meeting centers around a motion that has been made, seconded, and restated by the chair, and is in the discussion part of the motion process. That discussion should be focused on the specific motion that is being processed, not the concept in general. If the leader keeps the group focused on the motion, not the general concept, the discussion will be much more productive and far shorter.

One of the things that helps the parliamentary process run meetings efficiently is that once a motion is made, seconded, and discussed, it must be voted on. It may be amended first, or it may even be postponed to the next meeting, but it does, in almost all cases, get voted on. Thus, in the world of parliamentary procedure, discussion leads to a conclusion. The role of the leader during that discussion is to help the group lead to the conclusion on the specific motion before them.

To ensure the discussion is leading to a specific conclusion, the leader needs to redirect the attendees when the discussion wonders off topic. The leader should not wait until the discussion is totally off topic. When the leader sees it beginning to wonder off topic, redirect the attendees. Sometimes a simple question can help in the process. For example, when the motion is to purchase a computer, and they start talking about a printer, or where the computer should be located, the leader might say: “Is there any other discussion on whether or not we should purchase a computer?”

Sometimes during discussion, the meeting gets off subject and the side subject is a very important subject. The leader may hesitate to stop the discussion, because of the importance of the subject. But, the reality is that the job of the leader is to facilitate the discussion and keep it focused on the very topic of the motion. The other reality is if you stifle discussion, it will have a negative impact on future discussion. The alternative is to tell the person that brought up an interesting side issue that their idea has merit but is not applicable at this time. Then inform them that you are making note of their issue and if there is time at the end of this meeting, you will bring their issue back before the group. If not, you will be sure that it is included on the agenda of the next meeting. This is sometimes referred to as putting the issue in the parking lot. The key here is to always make sure you do not forget to bring the issue before the group at the later time.

An artful facilitator keeps the focus of the discussion on the will of the attendees and realizes that this meeting is not all about him or her. Since the leader is not a dictator, the focus of the discussion is not on the will of the leader but on the will of the group. Since, there is no room for a dictator in a healthy decision making process, the leader must also ensure that no attendee tries to dictate either. If so, the leader must focus back on the will of the attendees. The role of the leader is to assist the attendees in reaching their decision, not his or hers. Sometimes that is extremely difficult because the leader may feel that the group's decision is not a good decision and things would be much better if the group would adopt his or her solution. It is at this time that the leader must realize that he or she is not the only person in the room that has answers. The leader must trust the will of the group in the decision making process and accept the attendees' decisions.

As stated earlier, the rules of the group are very important. A strong leader helps the group religiously follow their speaking rules. *Robert's* has some great rules in place that are extremely fair and helpful to the leader. The chair should call on the first person who seeks recognition and then others in the order of seeking recognition. At large conventions, microphones are placed throughout the assembly and people wait in line at the microphone and the chair can then determine who is next to speak. In small groups, such as committee or board meetings, a technique that I have found effective is for the leader to indicate to the attendees that if they want to speak, they need to get direct eye contact with the chair and indicate to the chair that they want to speak. The chair keeps a list of the attendees who have indicated a desire to speak, in the order they expressed that desire, and calls on them in the order on that list.

There are some situations in which the chair calls on someone who may not be

next on the list. The exceptions are:

- If the maker of the motion has not yet spoken and he or she seeks recognition, that person gets the right to move to the top of the list or the front of the line.
- When a member has not already spoken on the same motion on the same day and someone earlier in the line or above them on the list has already spoken, the chair lets the member who has not already spoken speak before the other member gets a second time to speak.
- Hearing only one side of an argument is not healthy discussion. Therefore *Robert's* encourages alternating between attendees who are speaking for the motion and attendees who are speaking against the motion. In a large assembly, this is facilitated by microphones marked pro and con and the chair alternating between them. In a small group, after a member spoke for the motion, the chair could simply say, who on the list wishes to speak against the motion? Then the chair calls on the person who wants to speak against the motion who is closest to the top of the list.
- *Robert's* also limits the attendees speaking on a motion to two times. What a time saver that can be! When the attendees know they have only two times to express their views on a motion, they tend to save up their comments, making notes so they don't forget what they want to say, and make their points more succinctly.

Religiously following these speaking rules can not only have the group discuss issues more efficiently and effectively, but they help the attendees view the leader as fair.

Discussion during the decision making process is imperative. The leader must facilitate discussion during a meeting and make sure the discussion is focused on the will of the attendees and religiously follow speaking rules. In properly facilitating the discussion a leader can significantly contribute to sound group decision making.