

Ten Tips for Presiding Officers

Robert's Rules for Dummies

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Whether you're presiding over a meeting of 2,500 members or a small board or committee meeting, your job is the same when it comes to the goal of successfully managing a meeting. And to ensure that you manage successfully, here are some tips to help you establish yourself as a knowledgeable, well-organized and helpful leader.

1. Know Your Rules

One of the best ways to establish your credibility as a leader is to know your rules. If you don't know your rules, your members will know it, and you'll come to a sudden understanding of how it probably feels to be a deer staring into oncoming headlights. (I know of what I speak. I was there once - caught unprepared, not staring into oncoming headlights. And I don't ever intend to be in that position again.)

No feeling is quite as bad as standing in front of a room full of people who know more about your job than you do. For what it's worth, General Robert was in that position once, too. After his experience, he wrote a book on the rules!

To avoid being caught unprepared, make sure you're well read on your group's charter, bylaws, special rules of order, and parliamentary authority. No one other than a person who has held your office before you (and your parliamentarian) should know as much about these rules as you do.

2. Plan Your Meetings

Nothing benefits you and your group as much as being prepared for your meetings. Planning your meeting in as much detail as possible assures the best chance of completing the agenda within the time available (or at least knowing if you need to hold an adjourned meeting to finish your business). The process of planning your meeting so that you can cover everything you need to cover is much easier if you follow the outline below:

• **Make it everybody's business to know the agenda.** Use the minutes from the last meeting as your primary planning and management tool. Distribute the minutes and reports in advance of the meeting. The more everyone knows, the better you can budget your time.

• **Call on your officers and committee chairmen to submit their reports early.**

• **Call on members to advise the president officer of motions they know they intend to introduce.**

• **Read the reports so that you know what motions the committees will make, or what motions will be necessary to adopt recommendations.**

3. Start Your Meetings On Time

People have busy schedules. Your time is valuable, but it is no more valuable than that of the members who have arrived on time and are ready to start at the appointed hour.

I've been to too many meetings where the presiding officer allows a few minutes past the schedule time to accommodate members who are late. In my opinion, that's a big mistake. An effective presiding officer

accommodates the members who arrive on time and insists that the habitual latecomers adjust to everyone else instead of everyone adjusting to them.

Remember: Nothing you do commands the respect you must have as the chair as much as starting your meeting on time. Your members know you mean business, and that's fine, because that's what you're all there for.

4. Use Unanimous Consent

I discuss the concept of *unanimous consent* (when the chair declares a motion to have passed without taking a vote and instead asking simply if there's objection) in chapter 8. And in several places throughout this book, I mention its use in handling particular motions.

Unanimous consent is a remarkable tool for handling any motion for which it's clear and obvious that the assembly's will is to pass the motion.

The most recognizable situations where unanimous consent is use are is the approval of minutes and where adjourning a meeting. But unanimous consent is just as useful even if the question is on a bylaw amendment, as long as no opposition is apparent. Members rarely object to unanimous consent where they know that opposition is so minimal that it won't affect the outcome.

If you ask for unanimous consent and a member objects, you simply take the vote. Otherwise, it's a great timesaver, and members really do respect presiding officers who know how to save them time.

5. Use Committees

Encourage new proposals to be brought through your organization's committees. Members often have good ideas, but those ideas sometimes need some work before they're ready for a vote. Teaching your members how to take their ideas to committees can have great benefits for you and your organization. But members need to have confidence in their committees; willingness to help and assist them with their ideas. Take a look at Chapter 16 for more discussion about how to create effective committees.

Let members know that they can save time in general meetings by perfecting their ideas in committees. Saving time increases your own stock as a leader. Committees will be respected for making solid recommendations, healing to get motions easily decided one way or the other.

Remember: If your committees are set up well, everybody who's really interested tackles the discussion in the committee meetings, and the rest of the members know that the committee's recommendations are based on sound reason. But good committees go to waste without a strong leader to make efficient use of them – that's you.

6. Preside with Impartiality

Nobody expects you to actually *be* impartial. You were probably elected or appointed because you have an overall agenda and a program you hope to advance. But when you're presiding in your meeting, you must put your personal agenda aside and help the members make their decisions. You can't lose if you do this, because ultimately, the decision belongs to the majority anyway. You're far better off being known as a leader who

ensures that the minority has a full opportunity to present their case than the one who uses your power to thwart their efforts to be heard.

As I explaining in more detail in Chapter 7, the presiding officer must leave any personal or political agendas to those members on the floor who supports the same program. As presiding officer, you really only control the floor (and you're expected to follow clear and definite rules about how the floor's assigned). Everything else is really in the members' hands. It's *always* in your best interest to be known as a leader who helps the minority to make its case - and to do so no matter how you personally feel about their position.

To preside with impartiality:

• **Don't enter into debate.** When a member concludes his speech, don't rebut him, or argue with him, or explain why he's wrong. Say "Thank you," and recognize some on the other side of the issue.

• **Don't gavel through motions.** What clearer indication could there be that you don't have any respect for the opposition?

• **Don't vote (except by ballot) unless your vote will affect the result.**

• **Don't refuse to recognize someone just because you don't want him to be heard.** Instead, take extra care to assist all members in their efforts to be heard.

Remember: The surest road to your success as a presiding officer is to take the position that the members control the decision, and you're there to help them do that.

7. Never Give Up the Chair

Although at first this tip may appear to be an elaboration on my previous tip to maintain the appearance of impartiality, it's a little more than that.

Warning: No matter how strongly you feel about an issue, your job is to preside. True enough, Roberts Rules provides that if you can't preside impartially because you feel too strongly about an issue, you must step down and let someone else preside until the vote is taken. But I caution you to always consider where giving up the chair is really wise. And, also consider that the person who takes the chair may not gracefully return the position to you? That can get mighty uncomfortable. Take my advice: Don't give up the chair.

8. Don't Share Your Lectern

Put simply, never share your lectern with other speakers. Instead, provide a separate and distinct station for other officers and committee chairmen to use when giving their reports.

During a business meeting, your duty requires that you're always in control of the floor, and you can't be in control of the floor if you can't use your station to address the assembly without moving somebody else out of the way.

When officers and committee members make their reports, motions may arise and questions may come up. By having two lecterns, you can manage the discussion from the chair and the reporting member can remain available to respond to questions as the chair may request.

Remember: Members always address their remarks and comments to the chair, and the chair recognizes members to speak and as questions. It's your job and your station. Make the place from which you preside yours exclusively.

9. Keep Your Cool

Sometimes presiding over a meeting just isn't easy. When disorder erupts, no amount of hammering a wooden mallet on a sounding block is going to do anything but aggravate an already bad situation.

When Benjamin Bombastic decides to ignore the rules and fly off into seventeen different disorderly rants, you should calmly rap the gavel once and ask the member to come to order. If he ignores your request, the most effective thing you can do is to stand firmly at your station. Don't allow yourself to become engaged personally with the members. Instead, calmly entreat him to come to order.

It has been my experience that those extremely difficult situations -- when an entire assembly erupts in disorderly demonstration -- often come about as a result of perceptions that the chair is being partial to one side of the other. Whatever the reason, sometimes it's just best to wait until the inevitable silence finally falls, and then ask for unanimous consent to a recess so that tempers may ease. If you make mistakes that give rise to disorder, meet with those members in a position to assist you in reestablishing the respect due to the chair so that the meeting either can continue or adjourn.

10. Use a Parliamentarian

In the world of Robert's Rules, you don't have to go it alone. No matter what size your organization may be, when you have problems or questions, you can seek out the services of a professional parliamentarian. Resources are available online to answer questions, and local units of parliamentarians exist all over the country.

Small local organizations sometimes engage parliamentarians to assist with particular problems or with bylaw amendments and reviews, but it doesn't take an extremely large budget to have a professional parliamentarian serve regularly at your meeting. With a little planning, you can afford the assistance more than you probably realize, especially when you break down the real cost per attending member and the benefits of the assistance.

Remember: The parliamentarian's job is to make you look good in the chair. Much of your parliamentarian's work is done outside the meeting, helping you prepare for your meeting and know your rules. But when it comes time for the meeting, nothing beats the confidence you feel if you have a parliamentarian there to advise and assist you.