

Robert's Rules of Order The Legacy of Henry Robert

In 1863, Henry Robert, an engineering officer in the United States Army, was asked to preside over a large meeting. Captain Robert did not know how to preside, but trusting that the assembly would behave itself, he plunged right in.

With that plunge came the quick determination that he would never preside over another meeting until he knew more about parliamentary law.

After searching the voluminous and conflicting procedures used by the English Parliament and the United States Congress, he began drafting what is considered to be the definitive manual on parliamentary procedure, known as Robert's Rules of Order.

Over the last 140 years numerous editions of Robert's Rules of Order have been published. Robert's rules of Order can help make a meeting run briskly and smoothly but in some instances Robert's Rules of Order can actually hinder business. One such example is during board meetings. Robert's Rules recognizes the problem of applying formal parliamentary rules to board meetings where not more than about a dozen board members are present.

The following information is intended to highlight the commonly transacted business actions in both the larger meeting and in the smaller board meeting, highlighting the differences.

TOP TEN General Tips for the Presiding Officer:

1. Do not debate motions while presiding. Preside with impartiality. Consider having someone else in the group represent your position. If you relinquish the chair to someone else so you can debate, do not resume the chair until the vote is taken.
2. If casting a vote, vote last.
3. Recognize persons by name or location to maintain control of the discussion and the general decorum of the meeting.
4. Chairman should remain standing in a large meeting but may be seated at board meetings except for:
 - a. opening the meeting
 - b. welcoming or introducing guests or officials
 - c. putting motions to a vote
 - d. formally addressing the group
 - e. answering points of order, parliamentary inquires, appeals from decisions,
 - f. seeking to better control the proceedings
 - g. declaring the meeting adjourned

5. The chairman should repeat the motions that are made and seconded to help assure the motion is understood and properly recorded.
6. Do not allow debate on actions until the motion is made, seconded, and repeated by the chairman. If discussion on a matter of business is undertaken before a motion is placed before the group, the chairman must terminate the discussion and request the matter be properly placed in a motion and seconded before discussion continues.
7. "All those in favor say "aye" (yes). All those opposed say "nay" (no).
8. When a person calls out "Question" during debate the chairman is obligated to do nothing. This is often misunderstood by both the person calling out "Question" and the chairman. The person may believe that calling "Question" will immediately end discussion and force a vote. The person is technically out of order for not being recognized and at most the chairman might note that at least one person is ready to vote. The proper procedure is for a person to be recognized and then state "I move the previous question." This is a proper motion, requires a second and a vote of 2/3 is required to pass this action to end discussion and then proceed to vote on the motion being considered.

A chairman can however, offer that he or she believes members are ready to vote and, without objection by the members announce the feeling and proceed to vote. The chairman must be sensitive to the tone, duration and relevance of the discussion before taking this action in lieu of a motion.

9. The awkward situation when a person wants to withdraw a motion made without prior thought of the motion and the motion has been seconded. In this situation a person may realize the error and try to say they would like to withdraw the motion. This is not correct procedure. The chairman can take two courses of action. The chairman can let the course of action lead to a vote and a defeat of the motion, which is even more embarrassing than the person realizing an error in judgment and the attempting to withdraw. A better approach for the chairman to take realizing the error of judgment and the inappropriate motion would be for the chairman to state that "Without objection the motion will be withdrawn. Hearing none, the motion is withdrawn."
10. "Won't someone please make a motion to approve the minutes?" This is one opportunity to speed up nearly every meeting. If a motion to approve the minutes after read or corrected does not come quickly the chairman should state "Are there any corrections to the minutes as read (corrected, written, mailed, etc.)? Hearing none, the minutes stand approved as read or corrected."