

# ROBERT'S RULES *Made Practical*

by Eli Mina

**T**he ideas in this article are based on Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (2000) and the writer's own book, "The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings."

Are your council or committee meetings too long? Do you achieve little and agonize a lot? Does your meeting chair often lose control? Conversely, does he or she try to maintain too much control? Is time wasted arguing about seemingly unimportant procedural questions?

If you answered any of the above questions in the affirmative, you are in good company. Most meetings can be improved. People are often neglected to leadership positions for a variety of reasons, which may not necessarily include being effective presiding officers.

Can presiding skills be acquired? Can one finally make sense of those frustrating rules of Parliamentary Procedure? Of course. This article offers the answers to a few typical questions.

## WHAT IS PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE?

Parliamentary Procedure is the combination of rules and customs that govern the conduct of business in a deliberative assembly. These rules originated in the English Parliament, and were modified to suit the needs of non-legislative assemblies.

Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (RONR, 2000 edition) is the Parliamentary manual adopted by over 75% of such assemblies, which include many municipal councils and boards. Although RONR is often identified as "parliamentary procedure," it should be noted that there are books on this topic.

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE?

The purpose of Parliamentary Procedure is to help ensure that meetings are run efficiently and according to simple democratic principles. In the words from RONR:

*The application of parliamentary law is the best method yet devised to enable assemblies of any size, with due regard to every member's opinion, to arrive at the general will on a maximum number of questions of varying complexity in a minimum time and under all kinds of internal climate*

*ranging from total harmony to hardened or impassioned division of opinion.*

Generally, the purpose of rules of order is to facilitate progress, while protecting fundamental rights, that is:

- The right of the majority to rule
- The right of the minority to be heard

Rules of order should not be used mechanically. There are several fundamental principles that the rules are intended to uphold. Here are a few such principles:

*Clarity* – Members deserve to know the precise wording of the motions they are voting on. They should also insist on clarity of the procedure, especially when things get confusing.

*Efficiency* – Meetings are costly. (It would be interesting to do a cost-benefit analysis on one of your Council meetings.) Therefore, time should be well used. It is clearly a waste when 90% of the time is spent on things that don't make a difference, like futile arguments on

procedural minutiae. Council should be focusing on the business of the municipality.

*Order and Decorum* – The meeting should be orderly, with only one person speaking at a time, and with interruptions kept to a minimum. The discussions should be civilized and respectful: Hard on the issues, but soft on the people. A phrase for the mayor to consider is: "Could we please keep our comments to the issues?" or "Can we please change the tone of this discussion?"

*Fairness and Inclusion* – Each member should have the same opportunity to speak and influence Council's decisions. Yet in many meetings 90% of the time is consumed by 10% of the people. A phrase to consider is: "Council-member \_\_\_\_\_, you want to speak a second time. Let me check if there is anyone who wants to speak for the first time."

## WHAT IS A MAIN MOTION?

A main motion is a proposal that council take certain action or express a certain view. For example, a motion can propose that the council purchase property (taking action) or commend its staff on a job well done (expressing a view).

For a motion to receive a fair and efficient consideration, it needs to be worded properly. In the words from RONR: "A motion should be worded in a concise, unambiguous and complete form." Think of how much time you could save if motions were worded like that.

## CAN A MEMBER SPEAK OR VOTE AGAINST HIS OR HER MOTION?

RONR does not permit a member to speak against his or her motion. However, after hearing the discussion, a member who made the motion may change his or her mind and vote against his or her own motion. This makes sense, since members should be listening in a meeting with an open mind.



## SHOULD THE NAME OF A SECONDER BE RECORDED IN THE MINUTES?

No. Names of seconders need not be recorded in the minutes. Recording names of seconders can give false impressions and cause citizens to believe that a seconder supported the motion. In fact, seconding a motion does not indicate support. A member who seconds a motion only indicates that she or he wants it discussed. A member may even second a motion if he or she strongly opposes it and would like to see Council going on record as rejecting it.

In general, minutes should contain as few names as possible. The minutes should primarily have a

collective focus (what the Council did) and not a personal focus (what each person said or did). More and more municipal councils even go as far as removing the names of the movers from the minutes. The reason? Once the motion is on the floor and discussion begins, the mover has lost all control over it. Plus, the mover may have voted against the motion. Therefore, recording the name of the mover in the minutes can be misleading.

## IN CONCLUSION

Hopefully, this article has helped clarify a few points about rules of order and meetings. It is always good to remember that rules of order are intended to facilitate progress, and not to impede it. The rules are also intended to include members in discussions and collective decision making (on an even playing field), and not to frustrate, confuse or intimidate them. Use these rules in this spirit, and you will become their master, not their slave.

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