

Decorum during Meetings

Suggested Reading

From Robert's Rules for Dummies:

Nothing stands to ruin an organization's spirit and sense of group pride quicker than an acrimonious debate. When debate gets heated and personal, good members quit, and the antagonists generally don't have what it takes to keep the organization going.

Nobody likes acrimony, and nothing need keep you from having a spirited debate while still keeping discussion focused on the issues. The following list contains some points to keep in mind when the soup gets thick at meetings where you talk about a dues increase or what to do with a budget surplus:

- **Listen to the other side.** You expect the presiding officer to protect your right to speak even if it turns out that you're a minority of one. You also expect the other members to hear you out and to allow you the same time as everybody else to get in your two cents' worth. Give your fellow members their rightful turn. Listen to them — you may hear something that affects the way you think.
- **Focus on issues, not personalities.** It's best to just stick to the issues. You may disagree with the point, but you won't feel personally attacked if everyone sticks to the issues.
- **Avoid questioning motives.** It's not a good idea to say, "Mr. Chairman, the dweeb who just spoke is obviously trying to raise the salary of the executive director because he wants to get the director fired and hire his own brother-in-law."

The dweeb may, in fact, be glad to see the director go, and he may indeed be working to set up a raise for the next employee, hoping it's his brother-in-law. But when you're in the meeting, express your opinion based on the proposal's merits. Try saying, "Raising the salary of the executive director is unwise at this time because we haven't yet completed the assessment of a performance review."

- **Address remarks through the chair.** One of the ways things can deteriorate quickly is by forgetting the rule that requires you to address the chair, not a member directly, during debate.
- **Use titles, not names.** Things are more likely to stay impersonal if you avoid using names during debate. Refer to "the secretary" instead of "George." Refer to "The member who offered the motion" rather than "Myrtle." It feels a bit formal, but the idea is to keep the focus on issues, not individuals.

- **Be polite.** Don't get the floor and start reading some paper, don't argue with the presiding officer except by legitimate appeal, and don't do anything that otherwise disturbs the assembly.

At some point, you've probably been in a meeting listening to something of interest, and Mr. Sluggo behind you isn't the least bit interested. He starts talking about how his pet parakeet is better looking than the lady at the microphone. He's disturbing the assembly with his distracting chatter, but Robert's Rules comes to your rescue with a way to remind Sluggo that his chatter isn't appropriate.

If you have to handle such a disturbance and you can't deal with it quickly and quietly in your place, rise to a *Question of Privilege* that the buzz and chatter are affecting your ability to hear the speaker, and let the chair help you out.

From Robert's Rules of Order (Page 25):

1. Learn the correct way to make motions to carry on the business of the board/committee;
2. Amend motions if they don't express the need of the majority;
3. Know and observe the rules of debate and decorum in debate;
4. Call a point of order when a rule has been broken; (must be called attention to immediately.)
5. Appeal from the decision of the chair on a point of order if not in agreement with the decision of the chair;
6. Know the difference between the use of the motions "Lay on the Table" and "Postpone to a Certain Time";
7. Understand when one should consider abstaining from voting, step off the dais when abstaining and file a memorandum of voting conflict;
8. Know that motions that limit or take away a privilege require a two-thirds vote; and finally,
9. To participate by contributing ideas, voicing meaningful concerns and opinions in debate, and voting for principle.

Q. Can order and decorum be maintained while debating or discussing a controversial issue?

A. Absolutely. Order and decorum is assured if the rules of debate and decorum are observed. Debate "is the essential element in the making of rational decisions of consequence by intelligent people." (RONR 10th ed. p. 373) The basic rules of debate and decorum in debate are:

1. A board or committee member (or a member of the public) shall be recognized by the chair before speaking in debate.
2. Remarks must be confined to the merits of the pending question or topic under consideration. von Goethe said: "*We should quietly hear both sides.*"
3. When speaking in debate, a member shall refrain from attacking motives and avoid name calling.

Mahatma Gandhi said: "*Honest disagreement is often a good sign of progress.*"

4. All remarks shall be addressed through the chair. Members do not address one another directly.
5. Makers of a motion are not permitted to speak against their own motion, although they may vote against it. Mark Twain said: "*It is not best that we all should think alike, it is differences of opinion that make horse races.*"
6. Do not interrupt anyone who is speaking except in special situations where the urgency justifies the interruption.
7. Obtain permission of the board/committee to read from any paper or book.
8. Members of the board/committee or the public shall not disturb the meeting by whispering or in any other way.

Q. What if a board or committee member or member of the public interrupts another board or committee member or a member of the public, causing a smooth meeting to be interrupted?

A. The chair shall ask that member of the public or board or committee member to hold his or her questions and comments until he or she is recognized by the chair.