

Robert's Rules of Order

Robert's Rules of Order is a tool used by representative bodies of all kinds to bring order to meetings and allow the group to take care of business in an efficient and predictable manner. Robert's Rules of Order and other kinds of parliamentary procedures are a proven way of conducting meetings.

Why follow Robert's Rules of Order

You may be wondering why you would want to follow Robert's Rules of Order. The rules provide a procedure that takes up business one item at a time, promotes courtesy, justice, and impartiality. It ensures the rule of the majority while protecting the rights of the minority and absent members. It is a fundamental right of deliberative assemblies that all questions be thoroughly discussed before taking action. Robert's provides common rules and procedures for deliberation and debate that place the entire membership on the same footing and speaking the same language. The rules allow decision makers to make decisions without confusion, and the conduct of the meeting is controlled by the general will of the membership and not any single member. Being knowledgeable about parliamentary procedure helps you focus on the merits of the case before you, instead of how the meeting will be conducted.

How does Robert's Rules work within Boards?

Boards are created through state or federal laws or provisions in the City Charter or City Code. These laws govern the authority and scope of work of boards. City boards are required to create bylaws that define how their body

will be organized, its purpose and duties, and how agendas will be created and standard components for each meeting. Bylaws set the rules for quorum, number of votes for passage, who is eligible to vote and so forth. Robert's Rules are used to supplement any procedures not specifically stated in a board's or commissions' bylaws. Robert's Rules give general procedural guidelines but recognizes bylaws and the Open Meetings Act always take precedent. For example, Robert's Rules allow the chair to change the agenda after the meeting is called to order. The Open Meetings Act has posting requirements that the agenda must be posted 72 hours prior to the start time of the meeting and limits discussion to only the posted items. It is important to keep in mind that Robert's Rules does not know about the City's requirements under the Open Meetings Act, such as posting requirements and limiting discussions to only posted items. Once again, City rules take precedence over Robert's Rules.

How do Robert's Rules work?

Sometimes, Robert's Rules are perceived to be too complex to be realistic. This is due to the fact that to use the rules effectively, there must be a couple of other things in place. First, you must have well written bylaws and enough knowledge about the rules to use them effectively. Second, you should have an agenda that lends itself to orderly conduct of the meeting. And third, someone on your board should be appointed to serve as a procedural expert or parliamentarian, to assist the chair with procedural rulings. The board works through the items on its agenda by discussing each item

posted. The board takes action on an item through a series of motions. Motions are designed to ensure that every item is addressed in an orderly fashion. A motion is a proposal on which the entire membership can take an action or a stand on an issue.

Individual members can participate in a meeting through stating motions, debating motions, amending motions, and voting on motions. There are four basic types of motions: main motions, subsidiary motions, privileged motions, and incidental motions. However, most boards only deal with main motions.

The purpose of the **main motion** is to introduce items to the membership for their consideration. Chairs should not allow discussion of any item until a motion has been brought forward. Also, the chair must insist the main motion makes sense. The chair can help this by restating the motion in the affirmative. For example, a motion like, "The motion is to set the date for the holiday event to December 10th" is in the affirmative. Saying, "The motion is to not set the date for the holiday event to December 10th" is not stated in the affirmative.

It is the responsibility of the chair to make sure any motion is clearly stated for the record. Once a motion has been made and seconded, it no longer belongs to the person who made the motion. It is owned by the entire body. The body can discuss it, amend it, or vote it up or down. The person who made the motion earns the first right to speak to the motion.

There are six steps in handling a motion that is approved without amendments:

- 1) A member seeks to be recognized, and once recognized, states the motion.
- 2) Another member seconds the motion.

- 3) The chair states the motion and that it has been seconded.
- 4) Members discuss the motion (beginning with the person who made the motion).
- 5) The chair calls for a vote after full discussion.
- 6) The chair states the result of the vote.

Here are some additional rules concerning main motions:

- 1) They cannot violate federal, state, or local laws, or your bylaws.
- 2) They cannot present substantially the same question that was rejected earlier in the same meeting or is in conflict with a motion that was passed earlier in the meeting.
- 3) The same is true of an item that was temporarily disposed of earlier in the meeting – one that was postponed or referred.
- 4) No member can make a motion when there is a previous motion under consideration.

Subsidiary Motions change or affect how a main motion is handled and is voted on before the main motion. Some examples are:

- Move to postpone. The motion to **postpone indefinitely** is often used as a parliamentary strategy to kill a motion for the duration of that meeting and maybe permanently. If that is not the intent of the maker, then he or she should postpone to a specific date.
- Refer the main motion to a committee for review.
- Amend a motion.
- Limit debate.
- Call for the question – simply means that a member feels the item has been adequately

discussed and it is time for a vote.

- Lay on the table – means that the item will be discussed later in the same meeting. For example, you may be waiting for a particular speaker and you want to withhold discussion until he/she arrives.

Privileged Motions bring up items that are urgent about special or important matters unrelated to pending business. This would be a motion to recess or a motion to adjourn or to “raise a question of privilege” which could be something like a board member asking that the citizen speak into the microphone because the board member cannot hear them.

Incidental Motions provides a means of questioning procedure concerning other motions. It must be considered before the other motion. An example would be that a motion was made and debate started immediately. The member might say, “I would like to call for a Point of Order. I believe the motion that was made is outside the posted agenda.” The chair would have to stop the meeting and rule on the Point of Order before proceeding.

The part of Robert’s Rules that concerns most people is making an amendment to the motion. You should specify exactly what the amendment is. It is an amendment as long as it does not change the entire meaning of the motion. The chair should call for a vote on the amendment first and if it passes, restate the motion, as amended, and then take a vote on the main motion. If a board member wants to change the meaning, he should make a motion to substitute. A full debate on the merits of the original text and the substitute text would be held. The substitute motion can be amended. The chair would ask for a vote on the substitute motion and if

it failed, go back to the main motion. If it passes, then no vote is taken on the main motion.

Boards record agreement on motions by taking a vote of its members. There are four methods to vote.

By Voice – the chair asks those in favor to say “aye”, those opposed “nay.” Any member may move for an exact count if there is any doubt about which side prevailed. For small boards, it is recommended that the chair announce the vote by saying, “The motion carried on a 5 to 2 vote with Ms. Brown and Mr. Smith voting nay.” This helps the membership know what happened because often in small groups votes are by body language.

By Roll Call – each member answers “aye” or “nay” as his or her name is called. This method is used when a record of each person’s vote is required.

By General Consent – when a motion is not likely to be opposed, the chair says, “If there is no objection. . .” “The members show agreement by their silence; however, if one member says, “I object” the item must be put to a vote.

By Division – this is a slight verification of a voice vote. Members raise their hands or stand.

Regardless of the method of voting utilized by your board, each vote must be recorded in your meeting minutes.

There is one other critical point which you need to be aware of and that is called Order of Precedence. This tells you two things: when a motion is in order and in what order to vote on the pending motions. The online workbook has a document that outlines the ranking of the motions as well as what

can and cannot be amended and debated, and voting requirements.

Order of precedence means that motions must be considered according to the rank, meaning a lower ranking motion may not be brought before the assembly and considered until a higher ranking motion is resolved. This means that after a motion has been restated by the chair, a new motion that ranks higher may be considered but not a motion that ranks lower. For example, a motion to postpone to a certain time may not be brought forth if a motion for the previous question has not been resolved. But, a motion to postpone to a certain time may be brought even if a motion to postpone indefinitely has not been resolved. All subsidiary motions must be resolved before the group can return to the main motion.

Summary

This training has touched on the basics of Robert's Rules of Order. The purpose of Robert's Rules is to provide guidance to groups as they conduct their business.

Robert's has a couple of wonderful rules to remember:

1. Silence means consent.
2. You can do almost anything you want during a meeting if no one objects. You literally could have no motions or votes. The chair can say, "This meeting is adjourned without objection." However, if one person objects, then the rules need to be followed and someone would have to move to adjourn and a vote taken. We do not recommend you do this on actual motions but it can be done for recess or adjournment.

3. The rules are designed to facilitate full discussion and participation by all members in the assembly.