

Maintaining Meeting Structure with *Robert's Rules of Order*

Robert's Rules of Order *provide basic structure to meetings, but must be used with caution.*

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If you are someone who goes to a hockey game just to watch the players fight, then the idea of parliamentary procedure and orderly conduct of a meeting might not interest you. For those who like structure, we offer our perspective on the use of (and dangers of) *Robert's Rules of Order*.

First, a little history. In 1876, Major (later Brigadier General) Henry M. Robert authored and published the first of a series of books, officially the *Pocket Manual of Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies* but more popularly known as *Robert's Rules of Order*. (The current 11th edition—*Robert's Rules of Order Newly*

Revised—is the second complete reworking of the subject originally published in 1970 as the 7th edition.)

Robert wrote the book after he was asked to preside over a public meeting being held in a church in his community. He did not know how to conduct the meeting, and after a futile attempt to keep order, left quite embarrassed. As a result of this experience, he was determined never to attend another meeting until he learned about parliamentary law.

According to Robert, “Where there is no law, but every man does what is right in his own eyes, there is the least of real liberty. . . . It is difficult to find another

branch of knowledge where a small amount of study produces such great results in increased efficiency in a country where the people rule, as in parliamentary law.”

General Practices and Objectives

Although *Robert's Rules of Order* is sometimes used to other ends, such as stifling otherwise proper debate, its primary purpose is to ensure that everyone who has a right to speak has the chance to do so, and that there is an agreed-upon method of bringing matters to the deliberative body. In larger groups, stricter rules are sometimes required to accomplish this, but the aim remains the same.

Most school boards that have adopted *Robert's Rules* follow these general practices:

- Board members speak after being recognized.
- Board members do not interrupt the speaker.
- All remarks are courteous.
- No member may speak twice about the same issue until everyone else wishing to speak has spoken at least once.
- Some reasonable limit to the debate is appropriate to expedite matters and accomplish district business.
- Motions by the board president are frowned on but are not illegal or improper.
- Motions are seconded to show that a second person wants to talk about the topic. Debate and discussion on the motion follow the second.
- The rules provide for motions to close debate, but they are rarely necessary.

Not Always a Good Match

Robert's Rules has been widely adopted by school boards, largely as a matter of custom. It is the “go to” set of procedures for meetings of civic groups, corporations, and other organizations not bound by specific government constraints, so people mistakenly believe that *Robert's Rules* must be followed at school board meetings. In truth, state statutes rarely direct the use of any particular rules.

Robert's Rules of Order was conceived to provide procedures for organizations to meet in an orderly fashion. However, as applied to local school boards, the rules are more cumbersome than necessary and include calls for action that, if followed, would violate open-meeting laws, ethics rules, and other regulations in many jurisdictions.

For example, although *Robert's Rules* concedes that a member *should not* vote on a motion if he or she has a direct personal or financial interest, it does not prohibit a member from voting when a perceived or actual conflict of interest exists. On the other hand, federal regulation and state laws—including federal Uniform Grant Guidance regulations and state ethics rules—prohibit a board member with conflicts of interest from participating in discussions or voting.

On the topic of voting, *Robert's Rules* allows voting by secret ballot and in executive sessions—practices barred by the open-meeting laws in most states. Clearly, following *Robert's Rules* blindly and slavishly is a mistake and can get a board in trouble.

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Robert's Rules may not be the best fit for local school boards in another way: procedures are geared toward managing a meeting of a large group of people. The current editors of *Robert's Rules* have tried to address that issue by adopting modifications for “small boards,” which they define as “not more than about a dozen persons. . . .” Although those modifications as meant will not make *Robert's Rules* conform to laws, as above, they may allow for more manageable and informal rules. Those modified rules are adapted because they maintain most of the parliamentary rules, but with greater flexibility and informality.

Rules for Small Groups

Following are a few examples of the ways *Robert's Rules'* small board rules differ from the traditional rules:

- A small board may choose not to require seconding motions.
- The chair may take votes by a show of hands or a voice vote, but they are recorded in the minutes individually.



- When a question is perfectly clear to all present, the chair may put the question to a vote without requiring a motion.
- A board member may raise a hand rather than stand when seeking recognition from the chair.
- Rather than vote only to break a tie, the chair has the same rights to speak and vote on questions as do other members.
- There is no automatic limit on the number of times a member may speak on a debatable question, except in the case of an appeal.
- Informal discussion may occur without a motion pending.
- The chair need not rise when putting questions to a vote, nor must he or she vacate the chair and turn over the gavel to another in order to speak on a question.

These exceptions provide a flavor of what strict adherence to the “full” rules would require.

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Adapt, Don't Adopt

Procedures such as *Robert's Rules* assure members that their discussions and decisions are somehow more valid when they make motions, second those motions, call the question, and hold formal votes that are recorded in the minutes. But in reality, using procedures other than those in *Robert's Rules* would offer the same validity.

Robert's Rules is not the only option for giving order to a school board meeting. We have seen boards adopt *The Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure* by Alice Sturgis, originally published in 1950; *Parliamentary Procedure at a Glance* by O. Garfield Jones; or the University of British Columbia's “Simplified Rules of Order.” Although we have never personally seen it used, there is also *Mason's Manual of Legislative Procedure* by Paul Mason.

When a school board has sufficient time and a desire to ensure that the rules match its own desired practice and state law, it has the option to draft its own set of procedures. The Pennsylvania School Boards Association did just that.

In the end, the greatest advantage to using rules of order such as *Robert's Rules* is that all participants are

on an even playing field with a clear understanding of the structure within which everyone is working.

Robert's Rules of Order should, at best, provide a guideline for school board operations; however, it is generally cumbersome and conflicts with state open-meeting laws, the reorganization procedures specified in state school codes, and often with state ethics rules. In the end, because law conflicts with the strict form of *Robert's Rules*, it's necessary to adapt rather than adopt those rules.

Regular Review of Procedures

Over the years, boards, administrations, and laws change; therefore, once every year or two, it is wise to consider reviewing meeting procedures, including the means of setting agendas, ways of taking action, format and content of minutes, issues related to public comment, reports by the administration, and any special changes or rules the board wants to make regarding the governance, procedures, and order of its meetings.

Procedural rules are important but should not be the “tail wagging the dog.” They should allow for an orderly conduct of the meeting, provide everyone with clear expectations, and be an effective tool for managing controversial issues. At the same time, a board should remember that it will lose credibility if it follows only its procedural rules when those controversial issues arise.

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Boards should adopt their procedural rules through policy, whether or not they adopt *Robert's Rules* or any other published set of rules. The board also needs to ensure that the rules are universally available to all participants.

So, much like that hockey game, by following the rules, a board allows the meeting to progress in a way that gives everyone a fair opportunity to be heard. And as a side benefit, with all the excitement coming from the content of the meeting rather than from interruptions, the meeting should conclude in a timely manner.

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