

ROBERTS RULES FOR VIRTUAL MEETINGS

It can be a challenge to keep a meeting on track. Virtual meetings tend to be shorter, as participant engagement tends to fall after a couple of hours, so agendas leave little time for distractions. Side conversations, discussions that go nowhere, and poor meeting etiquette are all contributors to sidetracking the purposes of a virtual meeting.

The ideal meeting is controlled with careful measures to help the meeting run smoothly but not make it overly stuffy. To reach the goals that were set for the meeting as efficiently as possible, Robert's Rules of Order were created for keeping meetings on point and maintaining fairness in all meeting processes.

Here's a basic introduction to Robert's Rules of Order so you can use them for your next virtual meeting.

A Designated "Chair" Maintains Control

In a meeting governed by Robert's Rules of Order, someone is assigned the role of Chair. The Chair's job is to make sure that the meeting stays on track and its participants don't lose discipline or order. This includes responsibilities such as reading agenda items, stopping arguments, and interrupting when a particular discussion has gone on too long.

Everyone Else's Job is To Stay on Topic

To make the Chair's job easier, each participant has a responsibility to stick to the topic at hand (also called a motion in Robert's Rules) without going off on a tangent. It can be tempting to talk about what you want to talk about, even if it's not related to what's going on in the meeting. Take one for the team and resist. The better the group sticks to the topic of discussion, the more progress will be made and the faster the meeting will be over.

Participants Get Their Turn to Speak

When someone wants to make a comment about a motion or topic of discussion, they must raise their hand or be called upon by the Chair. The Chair goes around the virtual "room" in a fair order, allowing everyone who wants to speak on an issue to have their turn. Before any individual can speak again, the Chair ensures that everyone has spoken in that round of comments. This method keeps anyone from speaking out of turn, talking over others, or having side conversation. Limits on time for each individual to talk may need to be in place to hear from all.

Courtesy and Professionalism are Paramount

Above all, all participants, including the Chair, are expected to keep things professional. Discussions should be held with the goal in mind, and individuals should keep any personal issues or ulterior motives out of it. Being courteous, respectful, and congenial in

all meeting interactions will not only make the meeting more pleasant, but also keep it going strong.

Rules to Remember

The above guidelines set the tone and pace of the meeting and lay the groundwork for applying the Rules. The actual Rules dictate how certain situations should be handled. These are a few that can easily be put into place in an online meeting:

“Point of privilege”: When someone says, “point of privilege,” they do so when someone else is talking. Interrupting the speaker seems to contradict the rules, but in this case, it’s important for keeping order in the meeting. Someone can use “point of privilege” to note some noise or other distraction that is causing problems in the meeting. The Chair then decides what action to take.

“Point of information”: This is another case where the speaker can be interrupted. When using the “point of information” rule, the individual does so to ask for more information or ask the speaker a question. It comes into play to help avoid confusion and aid decision-making.

“I move that we table it”: You may have heard this phrase used in a meeting before. It’s used to halt the discussion for the time being until a later meeting. This can be necessary when there are more agenda items to take care of and the discussion on that current topic can’t be resolved. Someone must “second” the motion to table an agenda item and it needs a majority vote to pass.

Robert’s Rules is notoriously complicated and reading through the entirety of the guidebook can be daunting. Here are the basic rules and some examples:

- All topics for discussion must be listed on the agenda. If a topic of interest is not listed on the agenda, that topic may not be discussed at the meeting. It is important to communicate with the Chair or Executive Director *prior to the agenda being posted* if you want a topic included or are not sure if it will be.
- The meeting does not begin until the Chair calls the meeting to order. No board business should be discussed or considered until the appropriate agenda item is introduced in the order the Chair chooses to call it
- An “action” item on the agenda is one you can expect the group to review during the meeting. It may or may not indicate that a motion should follow. To take an action on behalf of the Board, there needs to be a “motion” regarding that action item. A motion is a call for discussion of, and ultimately a vote on, a proposal. Some items don’t require a vote. For example, an agenda item that asks the board to “make recommendations” about what to talk about at the next meeting does not need a vote and therefore does not need a formal motion. However, when the agenda item states the board will make recommendations regarding an “action” - approval of a letter of support, for example - a vote is necessary to act on behalf of the whole group, and a motion proposes whether to vote for or against the action. Whether needed or not, it is all right to make a motion on an action item, discuss and vote on it.

- A “second” on a motion means that at least one other person on the board feels the proposal should be discussed. It does not require agreement on the proposal.
- Only one person should speak at a time, and the Chair will call each person wanting to do so. The Chair should always allow the person who made a motion to speak first. As a courtesy, each person who wishes to speak on the motion being discussed should be allowed to speak once before anyone is allowed to speak again.
- This process of motion and approval of motions can be confusing because even an amendment to the proposal may need a motion, second, and vote on the amendment BEFORE the main motion can be decided. Anyone on the board can ask that the motion under discussion be repeated, so that everyone is clear on what action is under consideration. The idea of motions means only one proposal may be before the group at any one time.
- A majority vote is a final decision on the proposed motion. The Chair asks members if they are ready to vote after everyone who wishes to speak on the matter has done so. At this time, the Chair repeats the motion so everyone is clear on what they will be voting on. The vote can be taken in many ways, even simply by asking for an “aye” or “no” to determine the majority decision. While everyone has a right to have their ideas presented for consideration, ultimately the majority will determine what the board will or will not do.
- There are some instances where interrupting the process is okay. “Point of Information” is allowed at the discretion of the Chair when someone has additional relevant and important information regarding a current discussion that might affect the outcome of a motion. “Point of Privilege” can happen at any time - if the discussion has strayed from the proposal, for example - as a way to redirect the group back to the agenda. If you are going to interrupt the meeting, though, make sure it is for a good reason!
- Breaking a tied vote on something is where the Chair makes the deciding vote. If the Chair voted already, which results in a tie, the motion is defeated because it needed a majority to pass.
- If it is questionable how some aspect of the meeting should be handled, check online for reference guides on Robert’s Rules of Order to get some help. If this is not possible during that moment, ultimately, the Chair gets to have the final say.