

# Chairing a Meeting

## INTRODUCTION

Meetings are a uniquely valuable means of communication. They offer personal contact between a number of people present with each other at the same time. Each person's contribution is heard by all the others simultaneously and each person's reaction stimulates and modifies other people's responses. Thus little by little, each person's knowledge and experience is pooled until a consensus emerges.

Meetings function in broadly three different ways:

- **Speaker's meetings** where most people participate by listening
- **Decision-making or 'business' meetings** where relatively small and often representative groups of people discharge specific responsibilities
- **Liaison meetings** where news and information is shared with those not directly involved in the decision-making

The chairperson's role is essentially the same in every case – to provide the conditions in which information and opinions can be communicated effectively in order to achieve good outcomes.

Meetings cost both money and time. In clubs and voluntary organisations, this is measured in the cost of travel and in the hours of leisure time that those attending give up in order to take part. The chairperson's responsibility is to ensure that their precious time is put to good use.

The secret of success is *good preparation* before the meeting and *firm, unremitting and impartial control* during proceedings. Like a good referee in a football match, the best chairperson's quiet control will go almost unnoticed, as participants go home feeling that their attendance has been worthwhile and that the meeting has achieved its objectives.

## FIVE QUALITIES IN A GOOD CHAIRPERSON

1. A reputation for complete impartiality and the respect that comes from demonstrating it. Clergy face a particular challenge when chairing church meetings since they are self-evidently 'interested parties' in many issues that will be debated. Proving their impartiality when

chairing a meeting will thus be more difficult – but not impossible.

2. Thoroughness in preparation for a meeting and the ability to concentrate throughout it. Only this will enable a chairperson to distinguish essentials from secondary matters.
3. An ability to exercise firm but unobtrusive control over the discussion.
4. A capacity to exercise balanced judgement when offered two or more conflicting opinions.
5. A relaxed approach. A chairperson who can remain cheerful and relaxed in all circumstances will be in control of a good tempered and relaxed meeting.

## THE SPEAKER'S MEETING

*An event at which a visiting personality or 'expert' is invited to give a presentation or talk*

The chairperson's duties at a speaker's meeting are to control the meeting so as to enable the speaker's message to be heard and understood. The chairperson's role is to put the speaker at ease and to show the audience they are being offered something of value.

*Practical preparation:* The chairperson should take responsibility for ensuring that everything is ready – the facilities required by the speaker, including making sure all audio-visual devices are working correctly, and even checking that the speaker knows how to find the venue.

*Conduct of the meeting – the conventional pattern:*

- The chairperson's introduction should be brief, welcoming, highlighting why the speaker is worth listening to on the advertised topic – in a manner that is cheerful, complimentary but not so fulsome as to be embarrassing.
- Following the speaker's presentation, the chairperson should invite questions from the audience.
- When it is time to end the meeting, or sooner if the flow of questions dries up, the chairperson should invite a pre-arranged member of the audience to offer a vote of thanks.
- The speaker should then be allowed time to acknowledge the applause - and the meeting is over.

### *Six potential pitfalls:*

1. When a well-known personality is invited to act as chairperson. Too often the invited personality will hi-jack the event.
2. When the chairperson is tempted to 'sum up' after the speaker's presentation. Too often this means inflicting the chairperson's views on an audience who only want to go home.
3. When the invitation for questions produces an uncomfortable silence. This can be avoided by arranging with one or two members of the audience that they will have questions ready. The chairperson also can have short questions available if needed, couched in a way that shows positive interest in the speaker's presentation. However, the chairperson should avoid expressing any opinion about the substance of what was said.
4. When questions revolve around some minor point that was not central to the speaker's presentation. The chairperson should be ready to intervene and move the discussion in a new direction.
5. When a question is plainly irrelevant or even impertinent. The wise chairperson should invite the speaker to decide whether or not he or she wishes to answer it.
6. When, at the end of proceedings, the chairperson's over-enthusiastic announcement of the details of the next meeting leaves people with the impression that the speaker's performance on this occasion left something to be desired.

## THE BUSINESS MEETING

*An event at which a limited number of people with special responsibilities come together to make decisions*

### PREPARATION

The secretary of a body that meets regularly has the immediate responsibility for preparing and circulating the agenda for each meeting. The chairperson, however, has a crucial role in deciding the shape of the agenda.

The first question must be "Do we need to meet at all?" If the business can wait, or can be completed by other means, many members – especially in voluntary organisations – would be glad to see the meeting cancelled. However the meeting may be the only opportunity for members to interact socially. The informal business done over a lunch table has its own value. Confirmation that the meeting will take place,

including time and venue, should be circulated as early as possible.

### THE AGENDA

Matters coming before a business meeting generally fall into three groups:

- **Reports for information.** These could be vitally important for subsequent discussion.
- **Matters for preliminary consideration** where no immediate decision is needed.
- **Detailed consideration of a substantive matter** where a decision is needed at the meeting. Sometimes this will be based on a report from a sub-committee.

Items on the agenda should be grouped so that members know how each agenda item is to be treated.

The agenda, with its associated reports and other papers, must be circulated in good time. The more there is to read the more time members need to read it. It is not good practice to circulate additional material at the last minute, however urgent it appears to be; so a balance has to be struck. If email is used, a week in advance should be ample.

Agenda routinely start with apologies, minutes of the previous meeting and 'matters arising'. Church groups will also find appropriate ways of placing their meeting in the context of prayer. A perfunctory 'moment of prayer' is not enough!

The agenda should state when the meeting will start and finish, and may offer recommended timings of individual items. The chairperson should certainly have intermediate timings in mind, dealing with immediately urgent items quickly so that ample time is available for important matters.

### SHAPING THE MEETING

*Before the meeting:* The chairperson needs to be familiar with the contents of all reports and papers being sent out with the agenda. The author of the report may need to be contacted if certain sections are obscure or if new developments have rendered it out of date in some way. This gives the author the opportunity to deal with any apparent errors when the report is introduced at the meeting.

*The beginning:* The chairperson should be ready at the table with papers sorted well in advance of the starting time for the meeting. A chairperson establishes control from the start by taking punctuality for granted. The meeting should start at the time stated, but the stated

time should be realistic. Without this discipline, individual members will get into the habit of being late and people's attentiveness will be disturbed.

*The ending:* Similarly the meeting should end at or before the time stated. The agenda should be compiled with this in mind. It should not be the chairperson's objective to complete the business of the meeting as fast as possible. However, failing to work to an agreed end time makes it harder for the chairperson to restrain irrelevant discussion.

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## STAYING WITH THE AGENDA

Meetings can be distracted from the task in hand in many ways, but four can be foreseen and avoided:

1. *Queries about the minutes of the previous meeting.* After the chairperson has approved them in draft, minutes should be circulated as soon as possible. Queries should go in writing to the secretary to be resolved in advance. Minutes can then be taken as read and approved without discussion. NB This agenda item is only about the correctness of the record as minuted, not about the wisdom of any decisions taken.
2. *Matters arising:* This agenda item must never become a re-run of the previous meeting. The item should be entitled "Matters Arising, if not elsewhere on the agenda" and the chairperson should try to ensure the agenda specifically addresses all outstanding issues.
3. *Requests for additional last minute agenda items.* These should always be resisted. No one has had time to prepare; absentees will be unaware that the matter has been tabled; any decisions taken will be hasty and ill-informed. If the matter cannot wait until the next meeting, it should be handled by those charged with executing the organisation's affairs between meetings. If these people feel they cannot handle the issue, the only solution is an extra meeting.
4. *Any other business:* This item should be eliminated altogether. An item could appear in the 'reports' section of the agenda for 'News items and announcements' – but this would need to be tightly regulated by the chairperson. Members are free to contact the secretary regarding other matters to be discussed, so that they can be included on the agenda of a future meeting.

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## HANDLING THE DISCUSSION

*The chairperson's opinion:* In a working party or very informal meeting, the chairperson can readily take a full part in the discussion. In more formal meetings, where the chairperson's impartiality is critically important, there

may be scope for letting someone else, e.g. the vice-chairperson to take the chair. If the chairperson wishes to argue that the conclusions and recommendations of a report are wrong, courtesy requires that the author of the report is briefed in advance. He or she can then decide before the meeting whether to withdraw the report, amend it or persevere with taking it to the meeting. The chairperson's view, whilst it is likely to carry weight, may not be shared by the rest of the meeting.

*The chairperson's authority:* The chairperson gains and retains authority by speaking the mind of the meeting. This will involve offering tentative statements of what the mind of the meeting might be and inviting people to indicate assent (or dissent!). A careful restatement of a decision once it has been taken can often become the form of words by which the decision is recorded in the minutes. This is especially necessary in voluntary organisations and churches when few formal resolutions are debated.

*Managing the group:* The dynamics of a group discussion are complex and subtle. Many insights are to be found in the Parish and People 'Good Listening – the lifeblood of a Creative Learning Community' by Paul and Jenny Rolph (2011). The chairperson of a business meeting is working to make the best use of people's time together towards a purpose that lies outside the meeting itself. The meeting is not wholly about listening and learning, although both are necessary en route to competent decision-making.

*Ensuring balance:* The chairperson has a role to ensure that a significant point made by someone in a discussion is not overlooked. The original speaker may not be able to press the point, and a good chairperson may decide to restate it so that it can be addressed.

Not every point, however, can be answered. In General Synod, for example, most contributions to a debate are pre-written and free-standing; the chairperson maintains balance by knowing in advance the points that individuals intend to make. They are then called to speak in an alternating sequence – 'for' or 'against' the resolution.

In smaller meetings the chairperson has the delicate task of judging the significance of points raised, however well or badly they are stated. Not every member may agree with the chairperson's judgement, and the chairperson may need to satisfy a contributor that their point has been heard and fairly addressed even if the meeting ultimately adopts another point of view.

## FIVE WAYS OF STAYING IN FOCUS

1. A wise chairperson will grow increasingly aware of the different characters that make up the membership of the meeting – those who talk too much and those who let them – and will learn strategies to ensure that everyone's best contributions are heard and heeded.
2. A chairperson has a particular role in resolving matters when misunderstandings arise, when information has been misquoted or misheard, or when speakers are at cross purposes but are not in fact talking about the same thing. The simplest way may be to reflect back to the speaker what the chairperson heard and ask him or her to confirm whether this was what was intended.
3. A chairperson must ensure that meetings do not get bogged down in detail, when their role is more broadly to do with policy. Wrestling with details is the work of sub-committees.
4. A chairperson should be cautious about allowing a meeting to resolve to reject outright the recommendations of a working party. Such a decision will almost certainly be ill-informed and hasty. The better course is to refer the issue back to the working party in the light of the points raised in the discussion at the meeting. Serious discussion of major issues is often much better if it can be extended across more than one meeting.
5. If reports are to be published, accurate drafting is important. However, a business meeting is not normally a good place for members to raise detailed issues of drafting. The fact that a revision is being proposed should be noted, together with an indication of the change that is being proposed, and any detailed revision of the text should then be dealt with by two or three competent people.

## CLOSING THE DISCUSSION

Those who take the chair, especially in voluntary organisations, are often reluctant to bring discussion of an issue to a close. In the best interests of the meeting as whole, however, the chairperson has a duty to end the discussion when it seems that everything of value has been said. No discussion should be allowed to go on so long that other important agenda items cannot be given their proper attention.

If the meeting is divided on an issue and there seems no quick way of resolving the matter, the chairperson should ask the meeting whether further discussion should be postponed to the next meeting, or perhaps remaining agenda items should be taken first. If the second option is taken, the meeting can then return to the contentious

issue at the end, by which time it may be clearer how a common mind can be found.

Unlike in parliament, it is almost invariably not appropriate to decide an issue (least of all a church issue) by majority vote.

## THE LIAISON MEETING

*An event where news and information are shared with those not directly involved in the decision-making*

The larger an organisation grows, the more important it is to enable its members to know what is going on. Liaison meetings may be held in any circumstances where it is desirable to explain what is going on so as to retain the goodwill of those whose opposition could have serious consequences.

In these meetings, the chairperson has a delicate task. The whole object of the meeting is to promote goodwill, rather than find solutions to difficult problems.

The chairperson must still be in control; timing and structure remain important, and irrelevance must not be allowed to go too far. However, tact and tolerance will be the order of the day. The underlying issue for all liaison meetings is that of trust.

Those attending such a meeting may well not know the chairperson. They will need to be satisfied that they can respect whoever is in the chair of the meeting for their integrity and capacity to hear and heed what those attending have to say. The decision-making body that called the meeting would do well to find someone who can act as an impartial chairperson, rather than appointing someone from their own group.

*This briefing is based on a paper by the late Stanley Dixon, President of the Institute of Chartered Accountants, 1968-69, and a Reader in the Diocese of Worcester.*

## OTHER USEFUL PUBLICATIONS

### ***Discerning the Mind of the Deanery***

*(or similar body)* When Christian communities take counsel together, the aim should never be to win majority support for one group's point of view at the expense of the rest. Instead the task is to seek God's wisdom wherever it may be found. (John Cole – 2010)

### ***Good Listening –***

#### ***The Lifeblood of a Creative Learning Community***

The needs of the deanery highlight broader issues in this practical guide, which draws on the authors' rich experience as counsellors and teacher trainers. (Jenny and Paul Rolph – 2011)

Available via [www.parishandpeople.org.uk](http://www.parishandpeople.org.uk)