

ROLE OF THE CHAIR

Chairing a meeting can be overwhelming to someone who has not taken on this leadership role before. The Chair is the most important single factor of a good meeting. Here are some helpful guidelines for the duties of a Chair and other factors to consider before and during a meeting.

It is important to ensure that the meeting is called to order on time and closes when expected. Even though an agenda has been sent out, it's a good idea to announce the order of business at the beginning of the meeting to get everyone focused.

Once the meeting has begun, the Chair needs to direct the business and conduct the meeting by doing the following:

- Introduce speakers;
- Limit the time of speakers;
- Maintain order;
- Limit debate to the question or issue that is under discussion;
- Appoint committees;
- State and put to vote all proper motions which are seconded and announce the results of the votes; and
- Decide on points of order promptly and fairly.

How to be an Effective Chair

The Chair has the ability to set the mood for a meeting by his or her attitude towards themselves, individual group members, and the group as a whole. An effective Chair avoids lecturing or being domineering towards the meeting participants. He or she should also avoid offering personal opinions on topics of discussion.

An effective Chair:

- Asks members to approve the agenda with any changes before the business of the meeting begins.
- Stimulates discussion by asking questions.
- Balances the discussion by knowing the topic.
- Ensures the participation of all by interrupting those who are monopolizing the discussion and encouraging silent members.
- Keeps members on topic and avoids digressions by being assertive and telling members when they are off topic.
- Keeps the meeting on schedule; sticks to the agenda by making and keeping time limits.
- Helps the Council reach a conclusion on each item; knows when to halt discussion, call a vote, restate the decision and assign responsibility to enact a decision (action items).
- Clarifies or summarizes the key points of the discussion and the action arising.
- Allows all relevant views and information to be aired.
- Manages conflicts.
- Ensures decisions are made clearly and explicitly (by vote or consensus).

Some Tips for Conflict Management

There are many different models and techniques for resolving conflict situations in a group. Most of these techniques use the basic steps below.

- Accept conflict as natural. Don't be afraid of it. When conflict occurs in your group, treat it as an opportunity to examine the issues involved in-depth and to learn more about the underlying values and assumptions they hold.
- Bring hidden conflicts into the open; if you think there is a conflict hidden under the surface that is disrupting the group bring it out at an appropriate time.
- Disagree with ideas, not people. No matter how tense a conflict becomes, never allow a disagreement over ideas, beliefs, procedures or plans to turn into a personal attack against another person.
- When defining the problem, always define it as shared — it is the entire group's problem and the responsibility to resolve the problem is shared.
- When a problem is apparent between two people, get the viewpoints from others and move away from the two antagonists. For example, "*We seem to have a difference of opinion here - are there other points of view?*" Sometimes that can move the discussion forward.
- If the two antagonists are unable to move forward try to involve the two parties in finding common ground with each other; i.e. "*What do you like about Elaine's suggestion?*" Often summarizing the two points of view in a non-inflammatory manner can allow people to calm down and think about the ideas.
- Try to reach consensus, but if it isn't possible, summarize points of disagreement, check them with the group and move forward.
- Sometimes it helps to leave a contentious issue and come back to it later. Re-phrase the problem when bringing it back to the group and encourage the entire group to participate in the discussion.

• Aside from guiding the flow of the meeting, a Chair must be alert to the individual moods, behaviours, and likes and dislikes of participants. Unfortunately, some participants may have personal or hidden agendas while attending meetings and this can create difficulty with the flow of a meeting. The Chair has to pay attention to this possibility by getting to know participants and observing their behaviours and attitudes



during meetings. Depending on the degree of the problem, the Chair may have to deal one-on-one with the difficult participant outside of a meeting. No matter what, the participant should not be confronted in front of other participants; he or she needs to be reminded that a meeting setting is supposed to be professional without personal disposition.

These points are all valid for the Chair as well; they cannot be confrontational or domineering either and must act in a professional manner.

Keep on Topic

It is common for a group to get side-tracked or to go into unnecessary detail on an issue. At these points, the Chair has the responsibility of interrupting the discussion, or even an individual if needed, to bring the Council back to its primary purpose.

You can do this by:

- Reminding participants of the agreed-upon agenda and purpose.
- Making your comment in a way that acknowledges the usefulness of the views being contributed, but suggests that this is not the best forum to express them. You might suggest ways this view could be brought to the appropriate person or body (e.g., letter, committee discussion).
- Being gentle but firm, and use eye contact to make a friendly connection with the person you cut off.
- Once reminded, Council members will often keep themselves on track. Other times, you will have to be persistent.

And Finally

It is important for the Chair to ensure that they themselves are following all of these guidelines; they must model the behaviour they wish to encourage from the other School Council members.