

Getting your board to buy in to Robert's Rules



A reader writes, “The city council has never used much parliamentary procedure in our meetings. People speak when they want and sidebar discussions are common. How to ease the council into more parliamentary procedure without confusing them?” It’s a great question. Here are three steps you can take to get your council or board to buy in to Robert’s Rules.

- 1. Educate the council about why this is important.** In some states, parliamentary procedure and Robert’s Rules of Order are required by state law. Even if your state does not specify correct procedure, the courts have found that public bodies and nonprofit boards must follow certain key principles. In other words, you’re not free to do whatever you like in your meetings. It’s essential for you, as an official elected to serve the public rather than yourself, or a board member who is responsible to the public (and the IRS!) for a nonprofit organization, to carry out your duties in a way that is beyond reproach.
- 2. Adopt four key guidelines for effective meetings.** Invite your board to adopt four operating guidelines that are critical for your meetings. In brief, they are:
 - a. The chair is the servant of the group and the group is the final authority.
 - b. All members have equal rights, privileges and obligations. To ensure this, no one may speak a second time until everyone who wishes to do so has spoken once.
 - c. Courtesy and respect are required at all times.
 - d. The group will process one thing at a time.

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These guidelines are described in more detail [on our website](#), including a free downloadable PDF. Share them with your group. (If you have adopted Robert's Rules, these guidelines already apply.) Most everyone sees the benefit of following these guidelines, which are both fair and efficient. It can be hard, however, to break out of the “conversational style” of discussion, which leads to our next point.

- 3. Enforce the four guidelines.** You as the leader of the group have to be ready, once everyone understands these rules and the group has adopted them, to put them into play. Your tone of voice is critical here. Speaking in a firm and positive manner, you must be prepared to:
- a. Require everyone who wishes to speak to be recognized (raise their hand and get the nod) before speaking.
 - b. Ensure that no one speaks a second time until everyone who wishes to speak has done so.
 - c. Cut off anyone who speaks out of turn.
 - d. Stop anyone who interrupts another person.
 - e. Call out and stop rude, discourteous or personal remarks.
 - f. Follow the agenda and keep discussion on topic.

Once the council or board is used to this approach, you can introduce the motions Point of Order and Appeal ([read about them on our website](#)) and the other, more technical points of Robert’s Rules of Order and parliamentary procedure. In our view, however, the content outlined here is far more important than these technical aspects.

The chair has a responsibility, as the leader and servant of the group, to exercise a “generous authority”^{*} that will help everyone work together collaboratively and cooperatively to carry out their duties and serve their community. Once you are clear on your approach, you can encourage your group to buy in to Robert’s Rules, and make the difference to your council or board.

^{*}For more on “generous authority,” see Priya Parker’s book, *The Art of Gathering: How we meet and why it matters*.

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