

Using the Round Robin Method for efficient board meetings



The simplest way to make board meetings more efficient is to use the round robin method of discussion. In a round robin, each member of the body is given an opportunity to speak once before anyone may speak a second time, commonly by calling on the members around the table in turn. Sometimes, however, it's harder to employ this method than it seems. These are our tips for successful use of the round robin.

- 1. Somebody has to keep track and somebody has to be the enforcer.** A person in authority, usually the presider, must track who is speaking, and who has yet to speak. That person must also intervene when someone speaks out of order. We have seen instances where the presider gets carried away in the press of business and makes errors, or finds it a challenge to keep the order straight. We recommend splitting the job. The number two person, usually the vice-president, can track speakers. The presider must be alert and ready to get things back on track when necessary.
- 2. The maker of the motion starts the debate.** Under Robert's Rules, the person who makes the motion has the right to speak first. The round robin would then move to left or right or alphabetically, depending on custom.
- 3. Everybody has to be patient.** Sometimes members aren't sure what they think or are slow to express themselves. Since board business sometimes involves matters on which members have strong feelings, it can be a challenge to wait one's turn. Everybody involved needs to be patient for this method to succeed.
- 4. Members may pass.** It is appropriate to allow members to pass when their turn arrives, and then to offer those who passed a chance to speak at the end of the round.



5. It helps to vary the order. Psychology has demonstrated the “order effect,” under which those who come first in a listing often have undue influence over those who come later. If your board literally goes “around the table,” we recommend alternating between moving to the left and moving to the right. If your board uses alphabetical order, start with A one time and Z the next.

6. You can use the popcorn style. Under this style, there is no set order. Each person raises his hand and speaks as the spirit moves him. However, the presider or the vice-presider still tracks who has spoken, to ensure that each person gets a fair turn. If your board members are very self-disciplined, and will hold back once they’ve spoken the first time, you can even allow people to speak up without being recognized by raising a hand.

7. Members must show restraint. One of the most common violations of the round robin occurs when a member is strongly moved by a colleague’s comments and bursts out with a strong reaction. While the temptation to shout “that’s a lie!” is understandable, each member must hold back any comment until the second round.

8. The presider must show restraint. Another common violation of the round robin occurs when the presider, feeling that she possesses special information of relevance to the debate, responds to each speaker. This is patently unfair, since the presider then has many chances to speak to each member’s single chance. Like the members, the presider must gather her thoughts in silence, and then respond to the members when her turn arrives.

9. The presider speaks last. Because of the special position and weight of the presider’s position, he speaks last, after all the members has spoken. This supports the neutrality of the presider’s position, and also allows him to summarize the opinions expressed, a very important function — so long as it is a fair summary.

10. The members must be prepared to speak up. In the round robin, as in any gathering committed to fair use of procedure, members must be prepared to speak up when violations occur. A simple call of “point of order” should cause the presider to stop and ask, “State your point?” The member then voices her observation, and the presider either accepts the point or rules it invalid, or “not well taken.” The point of order must be timely and may interrupt a speaker.

11. The members have the final say. If someone disagrees with the presider’s decision on a point of order, any two members may appeal it. One says, “I appeal from the decision of the chair” and another says “second.” The matter is then referred to the board as a whole for decision. The board itself has the final authority. Any debate on an appeal follows the same round robin pattern.

12. Amendments restart the round robin. If an amendment is offered, the round robin is restarted for any debate on the amendment. Once the amendment is disposed of, the debate on the main motion picks up where it left off in the original round robin sequence.

Alternatively, a group may agree to hold off on considering any amendments until everyone has had the opportunity to speak once — if agreed to, this would be a “special rule of order.”

13. Guidelines have to be explicit. Each board has its own culture. It's important for everyone to agree on which guidelines will be observed. These suggestions can serve as a starting point for discussion.

While this method of conducting discussion at board meetings will lessen the amount of high drama and excitement, it offers the fairest and most equitable way to discuss board business. We strongly recommend it to everyone who is committed to fair and judicious discussion of issues in which each member has an equal opportunity to participate.

See our article, <https://jurassicparliament.com/exploratory-round-robin/> "Make better decisions using the Exploratory Round Robin," for another version of this technique.

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