

CHECKLIST FOR THE CHAIRPERSON

by Nathan Garber

John Kenneth Galbraith wrote: "Meetings are indispensable when you don't want to do anything." Unfortunately, in many cases, he is right. To make meetings creative and useful, a good chairperson is essential. The chair can make the difference between a successful, productive, stimulating meeting and a frustrating, disappointing, waste of time. Chairing a meeting effectively does not come naturally, but it can be learned through practice and effort. Use this checklist to help you as you learn the job.

Before the Meeting

- Meetings are for making decisions. Be sure you understand what decisions have to be made at the meeting.
- Plan the agenda to ensure that the most important and most time-critical decisions are made first.
- Make sure that reports and information necessary to make the needed decisions are sent with the agenda in sufficient time for them to be read.
- Contact individuals scheduled to make a verbal report and make sure they will be present or will appoint someone else to give the report.
- Note when someone comes unprepared to the meeting. Call them in advance of the next meeting with a reminder to read and think about the agenda items before the meeting.
- The board or committee can be severely handicapped when members are absent. Frequent absences may indicate personal problems for the member or a problem with the Board. If you have reason to think that any member is not making a serious effort to attend all meetings, call them to find out why.

At the Meeting

- Use a "Consent Agenda" to dispense quickly with routine and non-controversial agenda items.
- Rules of order are important to ensure that decisions are made fairly and that the rights of the majority and minorities are protected. Make sure that the rules you follow encourage adequate discussion and participation.
- Start meetings at the scheduled time.
- Introduce and welcome all newcomers.
- Summarize the issues to be discussed.
- Clarify the time-line for discussion.
- Keep a speakers list. Make sure that everyone who wishes to speak has done so before any speaker has a second opportunity.

- Encourage the quiet ones. Direct questions to them or go around the table so that everyone can comment.
- When discussion wanders, bring it back to the matter at hand.
- Be alert to nonverbal behaviours signifying dissent. Ask the dissenter to comment.
- When debate becomes confrontational and positions become entrenched, seek ways to identify the interests and values that underlie these positions and seek ways to negotiate resolution.
- Watch for signs that the debate has run its course. Then summarize the discussion and ask for a vote or expression of consensus.
- Ask the secretary to read all motions, amendments to be sure that they are clear, express the intent of the mover, and are correctly entered in the minutes.
- Before the meeting is adjourned (or before people start leaving), make sure that anyone who has been assigned a task is clear on their responsibilities and aware of the reporting date.
- Check to see if anyone has a problem with the next meeting date and time.
- End the meeting on time.

After the Meeting

- Review the previous meetings to identify problems so that they can be addressed before the next meeting.
- Review the Annual Agenda to see what is coming up in the months ahead. Update the annual agenda if necessary.
- Review this checklist. Consider what you might do to make the next meeting better, and what long-term strategies might improve your meetings.
- Consider what you might do to assist new members, deal with absenteeism, or remediate poor performance.
- If you have a vice-chairperson or if there is someone in line for the chairperson's role, include her or him in this review process.