



Conducting Debate: The Chair's Role

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Concerns are often expressed about members' conduct during deliberations – e.g., “They don't stick to the topic...”; “Everyone talks at the same time and they interrupt each other.”; “One member is so overbearing that others just cave in to what he wants.” The presiding officer is often blamed for not maintaining order. As one person said, “... he just doesn't seem to know how to run a meeting.” Although earlier articles in this column addressed discussion rules for members and chairs, it might be helpful to review the specific behaviors that contribute to an orderly and focused discussion.

The chair has the authority to require that members wait to be recognized before speaking and s/he may need to ask that they do so. Although recognition is not always necessary during calm discussions – especially in small bodies – animated and heated discussions can emerge even in small boards and committees. Insisting on recognition may be necessary to ensure that only one member is speaking at a time.

The chair can also use this authority to promote fairness and avoid dominance by select members or factions. In general, as a debate progresses, members who have not yet spoken should be given preference in recognition over those who have already spoken. If the debate becomes controversial, the chair should seek balanced participation. Insofar as members' positions are known, the chair should attempt to alternate sides as much as possible. If there have been repeated statements on one side, the chair might want to recognize those with a different point of view.

The chair also has the responsibility to encourage members to confine their remarks to the pending issue and to participate in

a civil manner. If a formal motion is pending, remarks should pertain to whether the motion should be adopted. When discussing an issue in the absence of a motion, members' remarks are expected to be relevant to the topic. When members stray from the motion or topic, the chair is expected to point out the irrelevancy and instruct members to keep their remarks germane to the issue.

Decorum is also expected during debate and discussion. Members are to avoid personal attacks directed toward other members' motives, intelligence, or expertise. As above, the chair is expected to call an offending member to order by pointing out the impropriety of the remarks. In addition, when the chair senses in advance that a debate might become heated and personal, s/he can remind members that they should address the body at large and not speak directly to each other.

If the chair fails to appropriately recognize members wishing to speak or fails to intercede in the case of irrelevant remarks or personal attacks, other members can seek to correct the situation through a point of order. A point of order is a parliamentary device that enables any member to call to the chair's attention a violation of the rules of procedure that is occurring. The chair is expected to respond by either agreeing and enforcing rules correctly or by explaining that the member's point of order is incorrect. In the latter case, if the member disagrees, s/he can move to appeal the chair's decision and, if seconded, the appeal can lead to a vote of the body that will either sustain the chair's position or agree with the member raising the point.