

Tips for the Chair

Being a good Chair requires not taking over the meeting, but facilitating discussion. This means creating an atmosphere where Board members can debate, struggle with issues, reach compromise and at times to agree to disagree.

Good chairing can be learned. For those about to embark on the learning curve, here are some tips to set you on the right path.

TIP 1: Define the purpose

The key to successfully chairing a meeting is to be absolutely clear about the purpose of the meeting. Once the meeting task is understood, it becomes easier to make the other decisions that may arise. Knowing the purpose of a meeting requires some thinking to be made about priorities and clarification of what decisions need to be made, and by when – so the Chair needs to know the meeting agenda inside out well before the meeting starts.

TIP 2: Clarify the rules

Ensure that everyone knows the rules of the meeting. Is it a formal or an informal meeting? Will decisions be made through consensus or will a formal voting procedure be followed? Whichever style of meeting is chosen and agreed upon, it is the Chair's job to maintain consistency throughout the meeting.

TIP 3: Switch into neutral

As a Chair you must remain neutral at all times. If there is an item on the agenda about which you feel strongly, ask someone else to take the Chair for that agenda item so that you are able to participate more freely in the debate. Introduce each agenda item with a brief summary of the background to the item and then quickly pass on to someone else.

TIP 4: Deal with diversity

Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak, including people from non-English-speaking backgrounds or who may have some disability that prevents them from jumping in and speaking quickly. Deal with diversity with patience and the meeting will reap the benefits.

TIP 5: Keep your hands firmly on the reins

Be democratic but stay in control. If someone else wants to dominate or divert the agenda and is derailing a meeting it is up to the Chair to bring them to order. This scenario has less chance of becoming personal and destructive if you can keep the meeting focused on the task at hand

No matter how rattled you may feel inside, keep the purpose at the forefront of your mind. Drop your shoulders, breathe evenly and speak in a calm, low voice.

Try using the following:

"I appreciate your concerns, Lee. Time is short for this agenda item, let's return to the issue for discussion which is ..."

Or

"I'm afraid, David, your issues are not able to be covered by this meeting. We have to move on to the next item/come to some resolution on this item. I will call you later this week to work out the most appropriate ways to deal with your concerns."

Acknowledge the interjector by name, be polite and show that you are listening, do not put them down.

TIP 6: The art of communication

As mentioned above, the Chair should acknowledge all members by name. A good Chair practices active listening and is able to acknowledge speakers with appropriate facial gestures and clarify or summarise their points when necessary.

TIP 7: Breaking a deadlock

When a topic has been fully discussed, the Chair should summarise the main points and put the item to the meeting for a decision or a vote. If as the Chair you feel that an item is far more complex than previously thought do not just let it run over time. You have three possible ways to go here. You can:

- Extend the time for this item,
- Refer the item to a working group for a report at the next meeting, or
- Set up an extraordinary meeting of the entire Board to deal with the item.

Whichever option you decide to take you will need to stop the discussion on the agenda item, summarise what has happened and ask approval from the meeting to carry out your option. If the item is causing too much "heat" without progressing, it is probably wise to choose one of the last two options to give people enough time to gather their thoughts.