

Tab 14 ~

Effective Meetings

In this **Tab 14**, you will find

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---------|
| What makes a meeting effective? | Page 2 |
| What is the purpose of the meeting? | Page 3 |
| Time and location | Page 3 |
| Notice of the meeting | Page 3 |
| Developing the agenda | Page 4 |
| Sample Council Agenda | Page 7 |
| Why a Quorum? | Page 8 |
| The Role of the Chair | Page 9 |
| Parliamentary Procedure | Page 10 |
| Tips for Conducting a Good Meeting | Page 11 |
| Motions and When You Need Them | Page 13 |
| The Art of Taking Good Minutes | Page 15 |
| Sample Minutes of a PAC Meeting | Page 17 |
| A Note on Chairing Difficult Meetings | Page 19 |

Effective Meetings

The basic purpose of any meeting is to conduct business in a fair and orderly way. As parents participating in BC's public education system, we want effective meetings

- to ensure that good decisions are made for our schools and students, and goals are achieved
- to enhance the image of our councils as effective organizations.

PAC, DPAC, and school planning council meetings are opportunities for parents to learn about public education, define and explore issues, and build understanding among people with diverse backgrounds and views.

What makes a meeting effective?

Certain attributes contribute to the overall effectiveness of any meeting:

Meetings are opportunities to build relationships, build and share knowledge, and solve problems.

*Joanne Quinn
Ontario Institute for
Studies in Education*

- has a purpose
- starts and ends on time
- has a manageable agenda of necessary business that can be accomplished in the time available
- is well conducted and remains on task
- decisions are made and business is completed
- follow-up action is clear (what, by whom, and by when)
- the chair remains friendly and professional throughout

Participants are more likely to feel the meeting was effective if

- various points of view were invited and shared
- all participants had the opportunity to contribute to the discussion
- creative ideas and positive solutions were generated
- participants were committed to the decisions made and action taken
- participants are willing to work together in the future.

What is the purpose of the meeting?

Every meeting needs a purpose or reason. If there is no reason to meet, the meeting should not be held.

Several things should be clear to all participants:

- Is this a regular meeting to conduct general business?
- Is it a special meeting to deal with a problem or crisis? What is the problem or crisis?
- What needs to be accomplished?
- Is the business of the meeting within the council's mandate under the School Act, its constitution and bylaws, or terms of reference?
- Can or should the business be accomplished in another or better way?

Time and location

Consider the best time and location for most parents. Some councils meet during the day and some during the evening. Others use a rotating schedule. At the beginning of the year, or when a committee is formed, ask members what works best for most people.

Take a look at whether your traditional meeting times make it difficult for certain groups of parents (for example, working parents) to attend. Flexibility in your meeting schedule may attract new members.

Notice of the meeting

All members of the particular group planning to meet (council, executive, or committee) are entitled to notice of the meeting. Check your bylaws or terms of reference for specific requirements as to the form of notice and the notice period.

If notice is given in accordance with the bylaws or terms of reference, then your meeting can proceed even if a member (or member representative in the case of a DPAC) did not actually *receive* the notice (for example, the bylaws authorize sending the notice home with students, but it was lost along the way). If the bylaws or terms of reference are not followed, your meeting cannot proceed.

Ask your members what is the most effective way of reaching them and, if possible, send the notice in several ways. Use public notice boards in community centres, places of worship, and local newspapers in all available languages.

In addition to members who are entitled to notice, there may be people who should be given notice as a matter of courtesy:

- school board chair and/or trustees
- superintendent
- principal
- teacher representative
- other staff representative
- student representative
- community members interested in the issues to be discussed.

Developing the agenda

The agenda is your master plan or road map for the meeting. It reflects your vision of how the meeting will unfold step by step to accomplish its purpose.

Eli Mina, The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings. 2000 AMACOM

Your meetings will be more successful if you plan your agenda carefully. A good agenda will help your council avoid the common pitfalls of

- too much business for the time available
- poor time allocation
- too much attention to routine items.

Preparing the agenda is usually the president's responsibility. It should be done in consultation with the executive and membership. This gives everyone a greater sense of participation, and will more likely lead to the agenda being completed.

Check your bylaws and see **Tab 7, Roles, Responsibilities, and Accountability of PAC and DPAC Executives.**

The first draft

To gather agenda items

- Check the minutes of your last meeting, and bring unfinished items forward.
- Ask your executive for items. Solicit their thoughts on how difficult issues might be handled.

- Contact committee chairs and anyone else who is going to report or speak on an item. Ask them what outcome they expect. Is a decision or recommendation necessary?
- For a PAC, conduct an informal survey of parents in the hallways, playground, and parking lot for items of interest or concern. This will help avoid unexpected, and unprepared for, additions to the agenda at the start of the meeting.
- Consult the principal for items to be considered under new business or the principal's report.
- For a DPAC, ask your member representatives for items of interest or concern. Consult your school board chair or superintendent for items your membership should know about.

Screening and prioritizing items

Your meetings will attract more parents if the agendas are interesting and varied, and important items are dealt with in a timely fashion.

In selecting agenda items, ask

- Does this item need to be discussed at this time, or is it on the agenda out of habit?
- Has enough preparation been done to allow members to make an informed decision on this item?
- How urgent is this item compared to other business? Can it wait?
- Is the person best able to lead the discussion on the item available and prepared?

With these questions answered, decide on the best course of action:

- **Deal with it**—leave it on the agenda.
- **Delay it**—to the next meeting.
- **Delegate it**—to an executive member or committee.
- **Drop it**—because it is outside the council's mandate or not worthy of discussion.

Estimating and allocating time

Meeting time is precious. Let members know how important various items are by estimating the time required for each one. Time estimates can be written beside each item on the agenda. If discussion on an item goes overtime, the chair can remind members of the time estimate and ask them how they would like to handle the item and the remaining agenda.

Begin with routine items (minutes, updates, reports), then move on quickly to items needing discussion, keeping these tips in mind:

- Avoid planning so tightly that you have no room to maneuver. You can't predict everything, so build in some flexibility.
- Consolidate related items, for example, reports and decisions on the upcoming parent conference.
- Allocate less time to routine items, and more time to complex items needing discussion.

If you have invited a guest speaker, put her first and hold your business meeting afterwards. She may be the reason many parents came.

Keep in mind there are no hard and fast rules to setting an agenda. The order of items can vary from one meeting to the next. Do what makes sense and stimulates discussion.

Handling reports

Executive members and committee chairs should prepare a report for every meeting. Reports can be brief and in point form. They do not need to be read out; copies can be made available before or at the meeting.

If a committee did not meet, the report should say so. The point of the report is to let members know what has happened since the last report.

Only recommendations in the report need to be considered by members. Members can ask questions of the person giving the report, but if discussion is needed, time should be scheduled into the agenda.

A **Sample Council Agenda** appears on the following page.

Sample Council Agenda

- 1. Welcome/Call to Order**
Introduce executive, guests, and new members.
Declare the quorum.
Door prize draw
- 2. Approval of agenda**
Ask for changes, additions, and approval.
Identify the most important items to be discussed so as to adjourn on time.
- 3. Guest presentation**
- 4. Minutes of last meeting**
Errors, omissions, adoption. Do not allow debate to re-open on an issue. Approving minutes is about ensuring they are *accurate*.
- 5. Correspondence**
Summarize correspondence unless an item is of such importance that it should be read in full.
- 6. Reports**
Reports need not be read out. Members deal only with recommendations in the report.
President/Chair—report on everything done since the last report
Vice-President
Secretary
Treasurer—see Tab 15, **Financial Management in PACs and DPACs**
School Planning Council
DPAC Representative
Committees—file a report even if the committee did not meet
Principal—a brief informational report. Items for discussion should be dealt with under New Business.
Staff Representative
DPAC—BCCPAC
 Advocacy Project
 School District report (by the School Board Chair, a trustee, or the Superintendent)
SPC—reports from each partner representative
- 7. Unfinished Business**
Items carried forward from the last meeting.
- 8. New Business**
Items requiring a decision, recommendation, or discussion.
Deal with the most important times first. Less important items can be postponed to the next meeting if time runs out.
- 9. Date of next meeting**
- 10. Agenda items for next meeting**
- 11. Adjournment**—End on time!

Why a Quorum?

The quorum for general, executive, and committee meetings is set in the council's bylaws or committee's terms of reference.

A quorum is the minimum number of voting members that need to be present at a meeting to make decisions. Common alternatives for setting a quorum are

- in a PAC, the minimum number of voting members that can reasonably be expected to attend, for example, ten
- in a DPAC, a percentage of the voting member PACs
- in a board, executive, or committee meeting, a majority (more than 50%) of the board, executive, or committee members.

The requirement for a quorum ensures that a representative number of voting members are in the room when decisions are made. It protects the absent members and the organization. Without a quorum, any decision your council or committee makes is invalid.

The quorum cannot be waived or suspended, even by unanimous consent. If you do not have a quorum, members can remain and discuss issues, *but they cannot make decisions*—decisions must wait until a quorum is present. If members leave the room during the meeting so that you *no longer* have a quorum, the decisions made while a quorum was present are still valid.

If the quorum set in your bylaws or terms of reference is too big or difficult to obtain, consider doing the following:

- Change your bylaws or terms of reference to make the number more realistic, (but you will need a quorum at the existing level to approve the amendment).
- Find out why members are not coming. Is the meeting time inconvenient? Are you getting the word out? Are your meetings sufficiently engaging and productive to attract parents?

In the absence of a quorum, your council or committee has several options:

- Adjourn the meeting.
- Recess, and see if interested members are available on short notice.

- Set a date, time, and place for a reconvened meeting, and see what you can do to attract a larger attendance.

The Role of the Chair

Chairing a meeting requires a *little* preparation, a *little* confidence, and a *lot* of common sense. Be familiar with your bylaws and use them to guide you.

As chair,

**CONDUCT
DON'T CONTROL**

As chair, your job is to do your best to ensure the proceedings are fair to everyone present. To help you achieve this end

- start the meeting on time
- stick to the agenda
- take speakers in turn
- keep the meeting focused on one thing at a time
- rule on procedural questions
- end on time.

As a participant,

- Be informed
- Arrive on time
- Keep your comments brief and on topic
- Be honest
- Allow others to finish speaking
- Be an active listener—understand what is being said
- Participate—ask questions, give your opinions
- Never make personal comments about someone
- Focus on ideas and issues, not people
- Help the chair whenever possible

And through it all

- be friendly and polite
- radiate enthusiasm
- keep your sense of humour!

What are the qualities of an effective chair?

An effective chair has special qualities that all of us, with a little time and attention, can develop. An effective chair is

- knowledgeable and prepared
- patient and respectful, with a good sense of humour
- a good listener
- decisive and purposeful
- able to encourage and inspire others to participate
- guided by the council's mandate and the members' needs
- recognizes diversity of opinion as an asset and opportunity for growth.

Parliamentary Procedure

Apply these rules as you conduct a meeting, and you will be effective, even though you may be weak on the finer points of parliamentary technique.

*John Noonan, PRP,
ASP, CGA*

Parliamentary procedure is meant to achieve fairness for all. It is used to

- facilitate action, not obstruct it
- enable the assembly to express its will
- give every member a fair hearing
- maintain order.

Parliamentary procedure is based on the following principles:

- justice and courtesy for all
- equality of opinion
- rule of the majority
- right of the minority to be heard
- do only one thing at a time.¹

Rules of order are designed to include all members in decision-making, with everyone having a fair and equal opportunity to participate and influence the group's decisions. Think of parliamentary procedure as table manners—a certain amount is needed for an orderly meal.

Many organization's bylaws say that Robert's Rules of Order apply if the bylaws are silent on an issue. Robert's Rules are often more complex than you need. You may use any procedure your council agrees on. Think *fair, reasonable, and responsible*.

See **Tips for Conducting a Good Meeting**, page 11.

¹ Adapted from John Noonan: *A Briefing in Robert's Rules of Order & Parliamentary Procedure*. Presentations to BCCPAC, May 2, 2003, and May 14, 2004.

Tips for Conducting a Good Meeting

1. *Before the meeting*, contact everyone who is going to report or speak on an item. Ask them what outcome they expect. Is a decision or recommendation necessary?
2. If you have the facilities available, circulate the agenda, minutes, correspondence, and reports to members before the meeting. This can be done through e-mail, a website, or photocopying (although the latter may be costly). Then, in most cases you will not need to read these items out.
3. Have a greeter at the door.
4. Begin by welcoming everyone. Introduce the executive, guests, and new members.
5. Discuss **rules of decorum** at the start of the meeting and reach consensus, for example
 - Members may speak only when recognized by the chair.
 - Only one person may speak at a time.
 - A member may speak a second time only after all those who wish to speak have had the opportunity to speak once.
 - Remarks must be confined to the motion or issue being discussed.
 - Members must remain courteous and avoid personal remarks.
 - In larger meetings, remarks are directed “through the chair”.
6. The **quorum** set in your bylaws or terms of reference must be present to make decisions. It cannot be waived or suspended, even by unanimous consent.
7. Keep minutes and reports brief. (See **The Art of Taking Good Minutes**, page 15.)
8. Avoid “off the top” verbal reports unless the matter is urgent.
9. If a decision or recommendation on a report is necessary, prepare the wording ahead of time and propose alternatives.
10. A motion to “approve”, “adopt”, or “receive” a report is not necessary unless there is something to be decided.
11. Seven steps for handling a **motion**:
 - a) A member makes the motion (“I move that...”)
 - b) Another member seconds the motion (“I second the motion.”)
 - c) The chair states the motion (“It is moved and seconded that...”)
 - d) Debate and amend it. An amendment must relate to the motion and may change it in one of three ways:
 - by leaving out certain words
 - by adding certain words
 - by replacing certain words with others.
 - e) The chair puts the amendment, if any, to a vote.
 - f) The chair puts the main motion (if the amendment failed) or the motion as amended (if the amendment was approved) to a vote (“We are now voting on the motion to... All in favour? All opposed?”)
 - g) The chair announces the result (“The motion is carried/defeated.”)

12. “Whereases” are not necessary and are not part of the motion.
13. Adoption of a motion requires a **majority** (more than 50%) in favour. A tie vote means the motion is defeated.
14. Be clear about what is being voted on and make sure everyone knows you are **taking the vote**. Reread the motion (or proposed amendment) before voting. Use plain language—instead of “calling the question”, say, “Let’s take a vote”.
15. A member who **moves** a motion may not speak against it, but may vote against it; the member may have changed their mind after hearing discussion.
16. To **second** a motion, a member does not have to be in favour of it; the member may simply want it discussed. In a small assembly (less than 12), seconding is not required.
17. A motion (mover and seconder) is not required to nominate someone for a position.
18. During debate, keep track of those wishing to speak. This is called a “speakers’ list”. In a small group, try going around the table to give everyone an opportunity to speak.
19. Ask your vice-chair or another executive member to help with anything you need during the meeting. The vice-chair can even chair part of the meeting.
20. As chair of a PAC, committee, or School Planning Council, you have a vote and may take part in debate (unless the bylaws state otherwise). *As DPAC chair or other DPAC executive member, you may vote only if you are representing your school PAC (unless the bylaws state otherwise).*
21. In larger meetings, it is best for the chair to remain impartial. Keep the dialogue among all group members, not between the chair and one or two members.
22. Before closing debate, invite those who have not spoken to do so.
23. If a procedural question arises and you don’t know the answer, call a brief recess and consult a rule book.
24. Of the motions in Robert’s Rules, it is suggested that only four be used:
 - propose a motion
 - amend a motion
 - refer the motion to a committee
 - postpone the motion to a definite timeDo not *table* the motion (this kills it) or postpone it indefinitely.
25. Members must agree to extend a meeting beyond the scheduled time. Unless they agree to extend, close the meeting on time and postpone unfinished items to the next meeting.
26. Think ahead to where the meeting is going. *Preparation is everything!*

Motions and When You Need Them

A motion is a proposal to take action. It is the main way business is brought before a meeting. It allows a member to bring up an issue or point of business, and it requires the group to focus. It is improper to discuss anything else while a motion is on the floor.

When is a motion required?

Any time your council wants to *do* something, the action should be approved by motion. If the council wants to *change* the course of something already underway, the change should be sanctioned by motion. And, if your council wants to *spend* money, the expenditure *must* be approved by motion.

There are many kinds of motions. Remember two things:

- Motions move your group forward—they give you the go-ahead to take action.
- Motions allow for debate and consideration of all sides of an issue. Because motions require the group to focus on one issue at a time, disagreement can be resolved by motion.

For steps in handling a motion, see **Tips for Conducting a Good Meeting**, page 11.

When is a motion unnecessary?

If there is agreement, a motion is unnecessary. For example, in approving minutes or a treasurer's report, the chair can simply ask, "Are there any additions or corrections?" If there are none, the chair can say, "Seeing none, the minutes are approved."

This can be done with any routine item.

What is a negative motion?

A negative motion proposes *not* doing something, for example, *not* holding a parent conference this year. If the motion is defeated, what happens? Does the conference go ahead? No.

This is confusing. Motions must be framed in the affirmative. An affirmative motion would say, “I move that we hold a parent conference this year.”

If the group had already approved the conference and the member’s intention was to reverse the decision, the proper wording would be, “I move that the council cancel plans to hold a parent conference this year.”

How do you amend a motion?

A motion can be amended at any time during the discussion and before the vote. The proposed amendment cannot have the effect of nullifying the main motion or changing its basic intent. The amendment must be relevant to the main motion and may change it in one of three ways:

- by leaving out certain words
- by adding certain words
- by replacing certain words with others.

The amendment must be approved. If approved, the motion *as amended* is then voted on. If not approved, the motion *as originally proposed* is voted on.

How long should a motion last?

A motion cannot bind future executives of your council, for example, a motion to hold a parent conference every year for the next five years.

People and priorities change. Your council’s decisions must be capable of being carried out within the term of your current executive. If a decision is important enough to extend beyond the year, consider amending your bylaws.

The Art of Taking Good Minutes

Minutes are a permanent, formal record of what took place at a meeting—they are the only record that counts.

Minutes provide members and interested outsiders with

- a clear and objective summary of the group's activities
- a way of updating members who were unable to attend a meeting
- a reminder of action to be taken, by whom, and when
- an historical record of decisions made.

The essence of good minutes

Good minutes are well organized and concise, and contain a clear record of necessary and useful information. They are readable and easy to follow, with short paragraphs and a consistent format using **boldface**, *italics*, and other formatting devices to highlight decisions, action items, and key points.

Good minutes are often a reflection of good meetings. Just as members get more out of a well-run meeting, the person taking minutes will find it easier to prepare good minutes from meetings where members respect the chair, speak in turn, and remain on task. Taking minutes can be a tough job. Both the chair and participants can help the minute-taker.

How much is too much?

Meetings are a place for group discussion and collective decision-making. Minutes should focus primarily on the collective decisions that are made and less on the actions or words of individuals.

It is a common mistake to record too much. While it is important to record the precise wording of a decision, it is not necessary to record the discussion that led to it. Word-for-word accounts are rarely practical or desirable. They are lengthy and often confusing, and can lead to arguments about who said what. Verbatim minutes can also discourage free-flowing discussion, as members become guarded about what they say.

The rationale for a decision may sometimes be important, or the group may feel that the flavour of a debate should be reflected in the minutes. In that case, it is appropriate to capture the essence of the discussion by recording the main points. It is not necessary to identify speakers—remember, the decision was a collective one—even if a member insists on having their position recorded. No member has the right to have their comments on record.

Closing the loop

Good minutes flow naturally from a well organized, numbered agenda. The agenda and minutes are part of a discussion loop: Each item is listed in the agenda, discussed at the meeting, and recorded in the minutes. The item is either completed at this point, or directed back into the loop through the next agenda.

Closing the loop is an important part of the meeting process. It is the collective responsibility of the chair, minute taker, and meeting participants to ensure this happens. All agenda items should be noted in the minutes, and action items should be taken from the minutes and included in the next agenda.

For **Sample Minutes of a PAC Meeting**, see page 17.

Recommended resource:

Eli Mina. *The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings*.
AMACOM 2000

✓ www.elimina.com/

Sample Minutes of a PAC Meeting

Minutes of Great Elementary School PAC

Held in Great Elementary School Library, February 29, 20__

1. Welcome

M. Smith, President, welcomed those present. Meeting called to order at 7:02 p.m.
Quorum present.

2. Agenda

Report on parent conference added.
Amended agenda accepted by consensus.

3. Approval of minutes of meeting March 3, 20__

Special thanks to E. Snow for chairing this meeting.
Moved by J. Brown that the minutes of the March 3, 20__ meeting be approved. **CARRIED.**

4. Correspondence

None

5. Reports

5.1 Treasurer's Report—See attached submitted by C. Daily (*or record details here*)

5.2 Principal's Report

- Vice-Principal Mr. Henderson, reported on behalf of Principal Mr. Ingle that the District Review Team will be in the district and school next week. There will be an opportunity for input from parents. J. Johnson, J. Brown, and A. Kelly will co-ordinate this.
- *Meet the Teacher Night* to be held in early September.
- Mr. Ingle will be retiring at the end of June. The PAC will be asked to be involved in selecting a new principal.

5.3 Staff Rep's Report—J. Low

- The Staff Committee brief to the school board on professional development ideas has been circulated to parents and staff.
- The staff wishes to thank the PAC for developing the workshop for parents on the new curriculum changes. Ms Low commented on how important it was for all the teachers present to see the parents' enthusiasm and hear their questions.
- S. Miller has been elected to attend the PAC meetings next year. The president thanked Ms Low for her valuable input to PAC meetings.

5.4 Report of PAC Rep to Staff Meetings—A. Kelly

- A staff priority this year is to review the school's Code of Conduct. Staff requests a meeting with the PAC to discuss surveying parents for their views.
- Staff requests the PAC to co-sponsor a BBQ in September to coincide with the Open House.

Moved by A. Kelly that the PAC co-sponsor a BBQ in September. **CARRIED.**

A committee will be needed. It was agreed to ask for volunteers in the next newsletter. **ACTION:** A. Kelly

5.5 Nominations Committee

J. Fraser reported that the March newsletter gave notice of the AGM in May and requested nominations for the Executive. So far seven candidates have put their names forward. The committee will continue to seek nominees. Members are asked to encourage others to put their names forward. **ACTION:** All members.

5.6 Hospitality Committee

S. Green was thanked by M. Smith for all the work undertaken by the committee.

S. Green to send report to M. Black for Annual Report.

5.7 Hot Meals Committee

A. Chambers reported the last hot lunch day was a great success thanks to parent help. Next month, the hot meal will be pizza.

5.8 Fundraising Committee

B. White reported all major fundraisers for the year are completed. Thanks to all who assisted. Details will be included in the Annual Report.

5.9 Student Council—Tom North

- Last dance will be May 11th. Profits to go to scholarship.
- Athletic awards to be presented May 31st.
- Year-end Awards Assembly June 15th.
- Grad Ceremony May 29th.
- Special thanks to the PAC for awards and for giving an opportunity to attend PAC meetings.
- M. Sloan, a Grade 11 student, has been designated to represent the Student Council at our PAC meetings next year.

The President thanked Tom for the valuable perspective he brought to PAC meetings. It was suggested that perhaps two students would like to attend PAC meetings. Tom agreed to take this suggestion to the next Student Council Meeting.

6. New Business

- 6.1** This summer, 22 students from our school district will be attending the National Conference of the National Association of Student Councils in Toronto. Information obtained will be used as a resource at the Student Leadership Conference in the fall.

Moved by B. White that the PAC provide \$200 for meal expenses for the students from the school.

CARRIED.

6.2 Parent Education Library

Mr. Henderson will check to see where the PAC can use a shelf in the library for resources for parents, and will report to next meeting.

7. Date and time of next meeting

The next meeting will be held May 4, 20__

8. Agenda items for next meeting

How to communicate better with all parents of the school.

9. Meeting adjourned 9:08 p.m.

Secretary

A Note on Chairing Difficult Meetings

Contentious meetings can be an opportunity to address difficult issues, achieve reconciliation, and refocus the council on its broader objectives.

Contentious meetings present a special challenge to the chair. Fearing a difficult meeting can prevent the chair from preparing so as to achieve the best results. Instead of focusing on preventing something negative from happening, the chair can focus on making something positive happen.

Two assumptions will help you prepare for the contentious meeting:

- Most people, if treated reasonably, will respond reasonably.
- Most members want a principled and productive discussion.

Treating people reasonably

Treating people reasonably means agreeing to reasonable ground rules, adhering to them consistently for everyone, and doing your best to treat everyone fairly. Reasonable ground rules include

- speaking only when recognized by the chair
- observing a time limit, for example, 2 minutes
- allowing members to speak a second time only after all those who wish to speak have had the opportunity to speak once
- encouraging members to speak on all sides of an issue.

Review these rules at the start of the meeting and agree on them. Then, if proceedings become difficult, remind everyone of the rules the group agreed to.

It is important to genuinely listen to a member's views and address legitimate concerns. What appears to be contention can often be attributed to a lack of knowledge or misunderstanding. With thorough preparation on the issues, the chair can correct a member's mistaken view or invite a more knowledgeable person to do so.

Remind members that, while the minority has the right to be heard, the majority will ultimately make the decision—and a good decision will more likely come out of a reasoned discussion.

Creating a principled and productive discussion

Most members appreciate a well-run meeting with a clear focus. A well-focused discussion often reveals that differences are more imagined than real, and common ground is broader than anyone realized.

Everyone benefits from hearing all sides of an issue. When all points of view are aired, the group can feel confident that its final decision took all concerns into account.

Although members' views may be divided, most of us accept that compromises need to be made. If we are treated with respect, and helped to focus on important issues, we are usually willing to agree to a reasonable compromise.

The right questions to ask

The following questions will help you, as chair, focus the group on reaching a good decision:

- What are the issues at the heart of this dispute? What are the side issues clouding the real ones?
- What are the principles on which everyone seems to agree? Where do members truly differ?
- How can the discussion be focused on the things that matter, and shifted away from things that are causing contention (for example, personalities or misinformation)?
- What needs to be done to bring closure to this dispute and begin the process of reconciliation and refocusing on the purpose of our organization?

Diversity of opinion can be an asset—different pieces of the truth we need to make a good decision. Debate, if well managed, can become an opportunity for growth, or a catalyst for a long-needed reexamination of your organization.