



## Conducting Effective Meetings

Meetings are very important to effective governance in all organizations including co-operatives. When members of a co-operative gather at a meeting, their purpose is to conduct business - to collect information and discuss issues and to make decisions on how these issues will be resolved or addressed. The methods co-operatives choose to carry out these functions will frequently depend on the type and size of the meeting. For example, at an annual general meeting, there may be a large number in attendance in a large room and discussion will focus on performance of the co-operative during the previous year. A board, executive or committee meeting will have fewer attending, participants will be sitting at a table, and policies and operational issues will be under discussion. Careful planning and preparation are essential to conducting effective meetings, regardless of type or size. The purpose of this fact sheet is to discuss five components that are essential to conducting effective meetings. These components are: a chairperson, an agenda, a process for making decisions, a well managed discussion and a productive physical set up.

### **The President or Chairperson:**

The President or meeting chairperson should be carefully chosen. The chairperson is responsible for providing leadership to the meeting, should be familiar with parliamentary procedure and set an example by consistently conforming to it. As the leader of the meeting, he/she must understand the bylaws and policies of the co-operative, the goals and purpose of the meeting, and he/she must know the participants and motivate them to contribute. The chairperson also has the power to maintain control of the meeting, should any questions about procedure arise or conflict occur.

The chairperson plays the following important roles:

- **Knows Those Attending the Meeting and Helps Them Participate**

Determines the skills and abilities of participants, involves and motivates them in the activities that have been designated to them, checks on their progress and provides guidance and assistance.

- **Plans Ahead**

Assesses the items of business that need to be addressed by the meeting, decides on the options available and then chooses the best option that will complete the task.

- **Prepares for Meetings**

Plans the agenda with the assistance of the secretary and other officers as required and checks on all meeting arrangements.

- **Presides at Meetings**

Presents the rules of order for approval by the meeting, follows the agenda, involves participants in the discussion and ensures that order is maintained.

- **Evaluates Meetings**

Evaluates every meeting to ensure that its objectives have been met.

## **The Agenda:**

An agenda is a list of the items of business to be covered in a meeting, including in some cases time allotted for items. The agenda helps a meeting remain focused, and reduces the possibility of items of business being overlooked or forgotten. The following agenda outline is often used:

1. Call to order
2. Approval of the agenda
3. Reading and approval of minutes of the last meeting
4. Officers' reports, i.e. president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer
5. Committee reports
6. Unfinished or postponed business
7. New business
8. Adjournment

Those invited to a meeting should receive a tentative agenda a few days in advance. The notice period is often determined by the bylaws of the co-operative. Advance notice assists participants by:

- Reminding them of the meeting;
- Ensuring that important items of business have not been overlooked;
- Helping them identify important items and be prepared to discuss them; and,
- Helping them focus on issues at the meeting.

Agendas should also be available for distribution at the meeting.

## **Decision Making:**

At meetings, reaching decisions can be complex and challenging. It is important that participants who wish to speak and express their views have an opportunity to do so. It also is important to proceed carefully, listen to concerns and opinions, and consider alternatives. Thus, when a decision has been made, it is more likely that a larger majority of participants will accept and support it because they have been involved in its creation. When decisions are made too quickly, there is a good chance that someone and his/her views have been left out.

The following process can be used to organize decision making:

1. Define the issue. State it clearly and in writing if necessary.
2. Gather all information relevant to the issue. All pertinent facts and ideas need to be known and meeting participants and the chairperson must distinguish between facts and opinions. A decision may need to be deferred so that additional information can be gathered.
3. List all possible solutions or actions. Encourage discussion to generate new ideas and alternatives.
4. Choose the best possible solution. Use the process of elimination to refine and combine the list in step 3.
5. Make the decision. Formulate a motion which is a formal proposal for action or decision by a meeting, vote on it and then record the results.
6. Evaluate the outcome. This is usually done once a decision has been implemented and can be handled through general discussion or preparation of a written report.

Most meetings use some form of parliamentary procedure such as Beauchesne's Parliamentary Rules and Forms or Robert's Rules of Order to guide them and to ensure that the traditional principles of a democratic meeting are maintained. These principles are:

- Every participant has rights equal to every other participant;
- The will of the majority is carried out;
- The minority is heard, its rights protected; and,
- Only one topic is considered at a time.

Following are two approaches a meeting can take in making decisions: parliamentary procedure, which is more appropriate because of its formality for larger gatherings such as annual general meetings, and an alternate method, decision making by consensus, for smaller meetings such as those of a board, executive or committee. Though formal use of parliamentary procedure is more appropriate for large meetings, its principles should guide all meetings.

## A. Parliamentary Procedure:

For meetings following parliamentary procedure "by the book", following are frequently asked questions and answers on procedure. *Robert's Rules of Order* has been used as a reference.

**Question:** *What is the proper sequence of steps for presenting and voting on a motion?*

**Answer:** A motion progresses through nine possible steps:

1. **Moved** - a proposal from the floor, simply stated as "I move that...".
2. **Seconded** - another participant feels the proposal is worth discussing and says "I second the motion". **No discussion should occur on the motion until it is properly moved and seconded.**
3. **Stated** - by chairperson or secretary to ensure that wording is recorded properly and everyone understands the intent of the motion.
4. **Discussed** - anyone who speaks must address the chairperson in a courteous tone and must speak only to the motion. The participant making the motion has the right to speak first and should be invited to do so. They should also be invited to speak again before voting. During the discussion each participant has the right to speak on the same motion although the Chair may set a time limit and by will of the majority may adjourn debate prior to allow all speakers to participate.
5. **Amended** - changing the wording but not the intent of a motion by adding, deleting or replacing words. NOTE: Each amendment is subject to the same nine steps of presentation and voting as is a motion. **The Chair may rule if an amendment changes the intent of the original resolution and in therefore not in order and members must vote on the original resolution and determine if they want to move a new motion consistent with the intent of the proposed amendment.**
6. **Called** - after sufficient discussion, either a motion is moved, discussed and voted on to end debate and proceed to a vote on the main motion, or a vote is called at the discretion of the chairperson.
7. **Restated** - the motion is read to the meeting to ensure that everyone understands what is being voted on.
8. **Voted** - chairperson calls the following options: "all in favour?", "opposed?" or "abstaining?" and counts the votes for each. **If three or more members entitled to vote at a general meeting, request so, a voting must be by secret ballot.**
9. **Declared** - results of the vote are announced by the chairperson and recorded in the minutes for future reference by the secretary.

**Question:** *How many amendments can be made to a motion?*

**Answer:** There are two kinds of amendments. Those pertaining to the proposed motion are "first rank amendments" (amendment to the motion). Those pertaining to the amendment to the amendment to the proposed motion are "second rank amendments" (amendment to the amendment of the motion). Only one amendment of each rank may be discussed at one time. Any number of amendments may be made to most motions, but "second rank" amendments may not be amended (i.e. an amendment to the amendment to the amendment is not allowed).

**Question:** *Can a meeting start without a quorum present?*

**Answer:** A quorum is the minimum number of eligible voters that must be present at a specified meeting (i.e. annual general meeting, board of directors) to conduct business. These numbers are normally designated in the bylaws of the organization. For a board meeting, a quorum is usually a majority of the board. If no quorum is present when the designated starting time of the meeting has been reached, then: The presiding officer may dismiss the group; or, The group may agree to proceed informally with the agenda, awaiting ratification of any decisions at a future meeting; or, The group may discuss any items of interest but make no decisions.

**Question:** *Who is the presiding officer at meetings?*

**Answer:** The president is designated in the bylaws to chair meetings. In his absence, the Vice-President is designated to fulfil this capacity. In the absence of both, the remaining members may designate a member to act as chair.

**Question:** *After considerable debate, we still are not ready to vote on a motion. What can we do?*

**Answer:** A motion to table the matter until the next meeting may be appropriate, so that more information can be gathered. A motion to table allows the meeting to put aside the pending question temporarily; or,

The motion may be withdrawn at the request of its mover if no other member objects. Motions to table or withdraw are not subject to debate and must be voted upon immediately.

**Question:** *What happens when someone calls "question" from the floor?*

**Answer:** Someone calling "question" from the floor indicates that he/she wants the motion put to a vote. Only if the chairperson feels that the motion has had reasonable debate and most members are ready to vote, should he/she call for the vote (i.e. "All those in favour?", etc.). The chairperson may call for a vote as to whether the question may be put before the meeting.

**Question:** *How should a committee report be handled by a meeting?*

**Answer:** A motion to "receive" a report implies that the meeting has not committed to its conclusions or recommendations, e.g. the monthly, unaudited treasurer's report.

A motion to "adopt" a report in whole or in part commits the meeting to some or all of the recommendations of the report, and often implies some action to be taken.

A motion to "accept" a report means that the meeting has accepted the report in its entirety.

**Question:** *Sometimes, while one motion is being considered, an alternative motion might be the better one. How can it be presented?*

**Answer:** The mover and seconder of the alternative request permission from the chairperson to read the alternative motion. If the chairperson is of the view that the alternative is consistent with the objectives of the meeting and direction of discussion, he/she can allow it to be read. If the chairperson is of the opinion that the alternative is not consistent with the discussion, he/she can deny the mover and seconder permission to read it;

If the alternative is consistent with the objective of the meeting, the mover and seconder of the original motion are asked by the chairperson if they will withdraw their motion;

If the original motion is withdrawn, the alternative motion is moved and seconded; or,

If the original motion is not withdrawn, the mover and seconder of the alternative motion inform the meeting that their motion will be moved if the original is defeated and thus urge the members to vote against the original motion.

## **B. Rules for Small Group Meetings:**

Parliamentary procedure "by the book" provides clear process for large meetings discussing large amounts of business. These rules are very formal and rigid. Participants in a smaller meeting may agree to relax parliamentary procedure.

One approach to ensuring that effective decision making is occurring in such a meeting is to develop motions, and thus decisions, through consensus. Consensus occurs when there is general agreement by the group on the decision being made. This approach also tends to eliminate the complicated amendment procedure which often takes place when formal parliamentary procedure is being used and it encourages maximum participation. In developing a consensus it is important that all who are entitled to are able to fully participate and that there is a clear understanding of the decision. It may be necessary to vote when members are not able to reach consensus but must make a decision.

If a small meeting using "relaxed" rules of parliamentary procedure discovers that any of the four traditional principles of a democratic meeting are not being maintained, then more formal processes should probably be reintroduced.

## **Group Discussions:**

Well managed meetings allow all participants to be part of the decision making process. Following are some techniques that the chairperson can use to encourage and support participation and discussion:

### *The chairperson solicits views*

The chairperson might suggest that comments are welcome from the group and actually ask specific individuals to share their views. Participants thus hear a number of abbreviated opinions rather than listening to one or two long speeches.

### *A survey*

After a short discussion, the chairperson asks for a quick show of hands to determine support for proposed ideas. This should help the chairperson determine how to proceed. This encourages participants to express an opinion.

### *Groups*

Groups can be very useful in the decision making process at large meetings and for generating new ideas from participants. The meeting divides into smaller groups, i.e. four to eight people, for a short time to discuss assigned issues. A person is chosen as a recorder to list the conclusions of the group. The groups then report their ideas to the entire meeting. The alternatives that are generated will assist the meeting in resolving issues and making decisions acceptable to all.

### *Brainstorming*

This is a procedure for generating many spontaneous and diverse ideas which can help to develop alternatives that will assist in resolving the issue being discussed and in coming to a decision. Guidelines for brainstorming are:

- - Don't criticize the ideas of others while brainstorming.
- - Impractical suggestions may trigger practical ideas among other participants.
- - The more ideas, the greater the chance of developing a very good idea.
- - Build on the ideas of others, improve on a previous idea or combine several ideas into one.
- - Choose one person to record all ideas on a flipchart so that everyone can see them and a record exists.
- - After a brainstorming session, critically screen the list of ideas for four or five consistent items or themes. Also, if brainstorming has been done in smaller groups, identify similar issues from the lists of individual groups. Finally, develop this "short list" of ideas into options for decisions.

## **Conflict:**

Conflict can arise in meeting discussions. Many assume that conflict is negative but it can be positive if it leads to innovation, positive change or agreement when discussing an issue. It is important to remember that disagreement is necessary to the process of group decision making. The chairperson may have to step into resolving conflict in a meeting in order to reach an acceptable decision. Following are steps that are useful in resolving conflict:

- Recognize that there is conflict and identify the issue causing the disagreement.
- Collect all information relating to the conflict, share it and assess it.
- Propose possible solutions, including the consequences of the proposals.
- Find a mutually acceptable resolution without coercion.
- Carry out the agreement and evaluate its effectiveness, with all parties sharing in the evaluation.

If a meeting does get out of hand, take a short break. When the meeting reconvenes, the chairperson can summarize the discussion up to the point of conflict or have opposing sides summarize their respective positions. The chairperson can then attempt to lead the two opposing sides in negotiating a solution.

### **Physical Set Up:**

Physical location and surroundings are very important to a productive meeting. The number of people attending the meeting will have to be taken into consideration. For example, for an annual general meeting where there will be a large number of people attending, it might be useful to have a microphone located in the centre of the room so that when people address the meeting, everyone in attendance can hear.

Audio visual equipment can enhance a presentation and clarify information that is being presented to a meeting. The type of audio visual equipment required to make presentations needs to be considered in advance and, once again, the size of room and number of people attending the meeting are essential in planning. For a large room with many people attending, the screen will have to be located at a height where all participants can see it.

The length and time of the meeting should always be considered. If participants are travelling a long distance, it may be necessary to schedule the starting and concluding times to allow for travel to and from the meeting. It is also important that arrangements be made in advance for breaks. Breaks can enhance a meeting by providing participants the opportunity to meet on an informal basis and discuss issues that they may not want to discuss with the entire group.

Other physical factors that contribute to a productive meeting include the following: proper lighting, size of room, acoustics, telephone, temperature, ventilation, comfort and position of seating, writing materials, restrooms, coat racks, parking, name tags, refreshments, extension cords and location of electrical outlets.

### **For more information contact:**

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