

Chapter 13

Etiquette & Netiquette: The Golden Rules

Post and Robert, a Match Made in Heaven?

Emily Post on Etiquette and Robert's Rules on procedure have much in common in their basic intentions — and not just the number of revisions that their books have undergone. Both of these cultural icons sought to teach us how to behave civilly to each other and get things done in society. Basic rules that they outline include deportment, saying please/thank you, and waiting your turn to speak. There are several basic pieces of decorum where Post and Robert agree that should govern our intentions toward each other.

First — Mind your Manners

It is always amazing to me how many grown adults forget how to say please and thank you when they are trying to get something done during a meeting. Robert's Rules constantly remind chairpersons and members to be polite to each other, including scripting the chair's language to include "please" or "may" when requesting reports or responses from the body.

Second — Do Not Speak Out of Turn or Interrupt

Absolutely fundamental to following parliamentary procedure is knowing when and how to speak in your correct turn. Business in deliberative societies cannot be conducted when the members are interrupting each other and when they are speaking out of turn on unrelated subjects. Etiquette calls interrupting someone else rude behavior and unfitting for people in refined society. Post's book of etiquette goes beyond this to describe the importance of listening and responding to the correct topic as being part of good manners when participating in any form of conversation.

By waiting your turn to speak and avoiding interrupting another person, you not only show your desire to work together with the other members of your society, you also show respect for your fellow members. Frequently, in formulating a speech for a debate, actively listening to those speaking before you will enable you to create a more convincing argument by addressing their concerns in your speech.

Third — Do Not be Rude

It may seem obvious to some, but in debate or wording of motions, there is no need to be rude or slander other parties who do not agree with your point of view. Perhaps this subsection should be titled "do not be crude." Although anger is a natural part of any conflict, allowing your anger to dictate your behavior by taking over your voice can only have disastrous results.

This is especially important for chairpersons to note. When

leading an assembly, it can become too easy to revert to naming people and speaking against them. Remember some of Robert's original courtesies for chairs and referring to members as members and yourself as the chair to avoid personal entanglements. In the same way, if members insist on slandering others in their speech, Robert declares them out of order and so should you, effectively ending their turn at speaking.

It's Not Robert's, but it is one of the Best: The Golden Rule

Almost every major religion and group around the world shares some basic take on the Golden Rule — do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This is a basic rule that should underline all our interactions as humans, especially when we are part of a committee. This is especially true when working online, where you do not have the benefit of tone or inflection to convey true meaning.

Some Common Mistakes Regarding Robert's Rules

Although some people might believe rules are made to be broken, meetings that use Robert's Rules do so for a reason. If the bylaws say that Robert's Rules are to be used, do not question it, and do not forget it.

Arguing in meetings has no place when it comes to etiquette, but it will still happen. In the case that it does, remember only one motion (or idea) should be on the floor at any one time. Do not start arguing about something that is not being discussed. What about secondary motions? Still, you

can consider only one question at a time, even if there are other motions pending. Then you handle each motion in order of importance.

Another good rule to follow regarding acting as chairperson is to respect all the members in the group and not voting impartially or on one side every time. A good leader knows better. If a vote is tied, then the presiding officer might be asked to vote to break the tie; again, showing impartiality to the situation is a sign of good leadership.

Do not say something like, “The parliamentarian said to do that” if that is not the case. It is the chair’s final call to make a ruling, and it is not polite to disrespect the final decision.

As the chair, it is polite to ask if there is any unfinished business that needs to be addressed before the meeting is adjourned. This would be motions from another meeting that were not resolved as well as business that still needs to be addressed.

Netiquette for Online Meetings, E-mails, and Instant Messages

Many people do not know some basic etiquette (called netiquette) for how to behave to each other online. Before you have an online meeting, or participate in one, here are a few things you should bear in mind:

Say what you mean in a polite and considerate way. If it will smooth the conversation out to use more words, do so. Wait for someone to respond to your previous question,

even if you type at 60 words per minute and he or she hunts and pecks, before you continue the conversation.

Also, in any netiquette discussion never type in all caps as it is considered shouting.

Regarding etiquette for videoconferencing, speak slowly and wait for members to respond, remember there could be some lag time as you are communicating around the world. Do not dress too loudly, and when you have to make noise such as shuffling papers or have other phones ringing, the mute button is everyone's friend.

For conference call etiquette specifically, be on time; take the call in a location where there is not too much background noise; try not to use your cellular phone, as connections are often poor; and do not put the phone on hold if you need to do something else. You would not leave a meeting you were present at any other venue, so do not do it in a conference call either.

ASHA Electronic Meetings

There is another type of electronic meeting procedure you might want to become familiar with called The American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA), and this group has a legislative body of about 150 members who regularly conduct electronic meetings to get their business done. The rules it currently uses were founded in 1999, and by looking at this organization you can further learn its rules, how the meetings are conducted, and how to adapt some of what it uses to your own organization, if needed.

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Cindy J. Crosby is an attorney who says she most often uses Robert's Rules of Order in assisting a presiding officer in implementation of the rules.

"I am the legal advisor to various cities and their boards and commissions, and it is important to know the rules when questions arise during the course of the meeting," she began.

Crosby first learned parliamentary procedure by sitting in meetings as an assistant attorney and observing experienced legal advisors in their role as city attorney to cities, boards, and commissions.

"I also learned by reading the Rules and visiting Web sites on the topic when preparing for a meeting and a particular issue may be discussed."

She did note, however, that in her experience Robert's Rules of Order have not helped the meetings she has been involved in for the most part.

"Robert's Rules of Order has not been helpful to most of my meetings and clients, as it is too cumbersome and not applicable to smaller meetings and forums. The rules have not added to the substance of the meeting or ensured that the proper procedure is being followed. In fact the rules often add to the contentiousness of the meeting."

Although she does attend teleconference meetings, she has not used the rules in those meetings because "Teleconference meetings I have conducted with clients, engineers and builders are not conducive to the formalities of Robert's Rules," she said.

Neither does she use them at for-profit business meetings. "Most for-profit business meetings I have either conducted or attended were handled informally,

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and Robert's Rules of Order were not necessary or conducive to the operation of the meeting."

When Crosby does use the Robert's Rules of Order she says the hardest rule for her to remember as a legal advisor to a client is the actual order of speakers when motions are made and seconded, and when discussion by the board members is permitted.

"I rarely lead or act as parliamentarian for a meeting," she noted.

She said she believes the hardest thing for groups to learn when they start to use Robert's Rules would be to use and follow them at every meeting while also using consistent application of the Rules.

"The group members also have a hard time understanding and relinquishing the floor and authority to the chair," she said. "This last issue may not necessarily be directly due to the application of Robert's Rules but the different personalities involved and desire by politicians and board members to get their message heard. Groups also have difficulty in understanding that the chair can vote to create a tie, and what happens when the chair does or when a motion fails. It is hard for members to comprehend that an item just dies and does not provide any closure in the members' minds."

The hardest ruling Crosby has seen most chairs have to make first depends on the strength and fortitude of the chair.

"They often have problems with controlling the general flow and procedure of the meeting and what to do next. Some can be easily flustered when challenged by a fellow board member or member of the public to either implement the rules or is questioned on a rule. Chairs also have difficulty in fairly limiting the time speakers may speak and often can be selective in limiting certain speakers. Also, as most chairs are not lawyers, chairs often do not follow up to ensure things are on the record. As an attorney it is always a concern that motions are actually voted on, that names of speakers are given, and that when a party nods that the record reflects the physical indication since the audio tape does not pick up when somebody shakes their head."

As for Crosby's favorite rule, "My favorite is the rule that permits a motion to postpone trumping any motion on the table. This can be a powerful tool to a board member who understands the application of this rule and stop further action and vote on a

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matter. It can stop a controversial discussion and possible death of an item. This can also be a double-edged sword and prevent matters from being acted on. In the game of rock, paper, and scissors, this rule is the “paper” in the game, as it can stop a motion to deny or motion to approve,” she said.

Crosby has helped an organization adopt Robert's Rules of Order when it was not previously using parliamentary procedure. “It was approved without question or comment,” she noted. “Other times cities have adopted portions of Robert’s Rules and added rules of their own. The problem or issue is not in adopting the Rules but in the actual application and implementation of the Rules. The Rules are not a problem until it applies to a member trying to get their item adopted.”

However, again, Crosby does not necessarily feel that Robert’s Rules of Order help meetings to run smoothly.

“Whenever there is a question on a rule it always brings up multiple interpretations and many of the board stating, ‘That’s not how it was done at the last meeting,’ or at another board they serve on.”

Still it is a good idea to implement when necessary, and she says that in cases when someone is not familiar with parliamentary procedure, she does try to help.

“If the lack of familiarity appears during the meeting, as it often does, I certainly do not want to point out their ignorance but try to diplomatically give guidance when I can,” she said. “Either before or after a meeting, if it is the chair that is not familiar with parliamentary procedure, I will either try to address the issue with the superior administrative staff member and have them discuss it with the chair or address it with the chair directly and hold the discussion separately from other board members. I may offer to give a training session to the entire board or entity or just to the chair. I may also offer additional resources such as books or links to helpful Web sites.”

Crosby has also worked with other sets of parliamentary procedure rules in cities she works with on a regular basis. One such city has a population of more than 500,000 and has adopted a modified and expanded Robert’s Rules. Although the basics of Robert’s Rules of Order have been adopted, there are also additional procedures for public comment and order of speakers. The rules have also been amended to include the procedure for placing items on the agenda such as deadlines before the meeting and required signatures, she noted.

When it comes to using electronic means with Robert’s Rules and the certain miscommunication at times, Crosby advised, “Included in the problem

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of interpretation of words is the lack of the ability of conveying the tone of a message. In order to avoid this issue, I have had to learn to be much briefer in my e-mails. I feel that the "emoticons" such as happy faces are not professional and will not use them in work-related e-mails. In effort to avoid these scenarios, which I have experienced many times, I have attempted to initiate more telephone conversations when possible, then follow up with an e-mail stating what the conversation entailed."

Although Crosby does not have a particular story to tell about using Robert's Rules of Order she did add, "With most work, preparation is the key. It is too late to learn the rules during the meeting. To the extent possible, not only is it important to know the rules prior to the meeting, but also to discuss potential issues with staff and members of the board that they anticipate may arise during the meeting."

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