



Tip Sheet 3

Roles of the Meeting Chair

The Chair plays a crucial role in the success of a meeting. This tip sheet provides tools and ideas for chairing meetings effectively, bringing out the best in members, and orchestrating the production of quality discussions and consensus.

The Chair has three roles:

1. Managing people (building partners)
2. Managing time (establishing a comfortable pace)
3. Managing the agenda (building quality decisions)

1. Managing People

The Chair should encourage committee members to act as responsible partners in the decision-making process and ensure that their knowledge and ideas are considered. The Chair is responsible for:

- Setting the tone, direction and guidelines for the meeting. For example:

“Welcome everyone to this meeting of the ____ committee. I thank you for arriving here on time and I will do my best to make this meeting efficient, effective and inclusive.”

The purpose of this meeting is to address the following key topics: _____. The agenda items that will present a bit of a challenge are _____, but I know that we can work together in the best interests of the organization and generate positive and credible decisions.

We are scheduled to end the meeting by ____, and we’ll have a refreshment break at about ____.

As you can see the agenda is quite full, and I will need your help by staying focused, avoiding digressions, keeping your remarks brief and to the point, and keeping the tone of our discussions respectful and constructive – especially when we deal with tough issues.

Please speak only after being recognized by myself, and remember that first-time speakers get priority over second-time speakers. Also, we need everyone to focus on the discussion, so please turn off (or silence) cell phones and pagers. If you are using laptops, please refrain from checking your e-mail. Of course, if you find the meeting too slow and monotonous, remember that suffering is optional and please give me your feedback.

Are there any questions or concerns about this meeting or the guidelines I proposed? Can I count on your support in observing these guidelines? (Pause) Thank you. Let’s get going.”

- Ensuring members have equal opportunities to speak. For example:

“Thank you Joan and Rick. We need to hear from people who have not spoken. Ruth is next.”

Or: “Shall we go around the table and hear from those who have not spoken? Please make your comments brief. If you have nothing to add, please say ‘Pass.’ Let’s start with you, Mary. What is your perspective on this issue?”

Or: “Rob has an important piece of information for us and is asking to speak ahead of others who are waiting to speak. Is that OK? Is there any objection to this? Thank you. Rob, go ahead.”

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- Maintaining a safe environment. For example:

“Please remember that there is no such thing as a stupid question or comment. The only stupid comment may be the significant idea that you keep to yourself.”

Or: *“We need to listen to one another and make it safe for people to speak.”*

Or: *“Members, I need to remind you to focus on issues and not on personalities. We need to keep a civilized and respectful tone, especially when issues are tough. Can we please do that?”*

- Responding to non-verbal clues, such as frowns or eye rolling. For example:

“Is there a problem, Austin?”

Or: *“Liz, a penny for your thoughts?”*

- Acknowledging significant contributions by group members. For example:

“Before we move to the next agenda item, I’d like to acknowledge what great work you did for us, Tom. That report was thorough and informative and helped us understand these very complex issues. On behalf of all of us, thank you Tom.”

Or: *“Before we end this meeting, I want to compliment everyone for your work here today. We had some very tough issues to address and we dealt with them in a manner that will make our membership proud of us. It has been a pleasure working with you.”*

Or: *“Let’s give a round of applause to Greg on his appointment to the ____ Committee. It also happens to be Greg’s birthday today, so we have a cake coming. Happy birthday to you, etc.”*

2. Managing Time

By effectively managing time, the Chair establishes a comfortable pace for the meeting. This makes it safe for people to speak and share their ideas. Effective time management prevents a rush at the end of the meeting and ensures that all issues (including the last few) receive the attention they need.

Here are a few phrases to consider:

“We have three major issues to consider in the next 90 minutes. Can we agree to set aside 30 minutes per

issue? Is there any objection to that? Thank you. We’ll start with the first issue.”

“We have five minutes left for this discussion. We need to start wrapping up.”

“Does anyone have anything new to add, and, if not, shall we move on?”

“Our time for this issue is coming to an end, but it seems like we could use an extra five minutes to achieve a better decision. Is it acceptable to extend the time by 5 minutes? Is there any objection to this? (Pause) There being no objection, discussion is extended by 5 minutes.”

“Rick, we need you to get to the point. Our time is running short and we have a busy agenda.”

“Joan, is there a way to say what you’re asking for in just one sentence?”

3. Managing the Agenda

By effectively managing the agenda, the Chair ensures that all issues are clearly framed and confusion is minimized.

Agenda management involves:

- Clarifying and framing each issue before discussion begins. For example:

“Next on our agenda we have the Advocacy sub-committee report. Tammy will report on behalf of the sub-committee. Then we’ll take questions, and then Tammy will make a motion to approve the recommended initiative. We have a total of 30 minutes for this agenda item. Tammy, go ahead.”

- Intervening to keep the meeting on track. For example:

“We’re off topic. The topic we’re discussing now is _____. Our agenda is busy, so we need to get back on track.”

Or: *“The core issue here is _____, and not _____. Can we please stay focused on the core issue?”*

Or: *“There are several sub-topics here: __, __ and __. I suggest we discuss them one at a time, for five minutes each. Is that OK? Let’s start with the first sub-topic, which is _____.”*

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- Facilitating changes to the agenda. For example:
“There is a request to change the agenda and consider item 10 now. Is there any objection to that? (Pause) There being no objection, we’ll proceed to item 10 now and return to item 4 afterwards.”
- Raising questions and stimulating discussion. For example:
“Can I raise a question here? How would this solution address the concern that was expressed at the last meeting about ____?”
- Re-directing discussion from negativity to proposed solutions. For example:
“Can I make a suggestion? You are certainly entitled to complain and criticize if you want. But at some point we need to move away from opposing and to start proposing solutions. Are we ready to discuss what might help us resolve these difficulties and start moving forward?”
- Recognizing and discouraging action on “Green Bananas” (late additions to the agenda). For example:
“In fairness, this seems to be a significant issue and we do not have the benefit of advance notice and analysis. Unless the group tells me otherwise, I suggest we allow only limited discussion, and then postpone this item to the next meeting. Can we agree to this?”
- Varying the pace and facilitation of the meeting. For example:
“Can I make a suggestion? We’ve been working hard for a while, but without any progress. How about

doing this: In a moment we’ll take a break. Each of you will team up with someone who has opposing views to yours. During the break you’ll try to learn more about your partner and the reasons why he or she feels the way they do. This exercise could help us resolve some of the sticky points that we’ve struggled with. Is this OK? Thanks. It’s time for a break. Let’s resume in 20 minutes, hopefully with some fresh ideas.”

- Giving periodic summary statements. For example:
“Let me see if the flip chart captures all the key points. The key points are: ____, ____ and ____. Did I miss anything substantial? Tony, did you capture the key points for the minutes? And now to our consensus. It seems to me that we agree that _____. Am I right? OK, then who will do what and by when? Thank you. Let me confirm our consensus and follow-up duties: _____. Tony, do you have everything you need for the minutes?”
- Facilitating decision-making and recording of minutes. For example:
“Our time for this motion is out and we’ll take a vote on it. The motion reads as follows: _____ . Those in favor of this motion raise your hands. (Pause) Those opposed to the motion raise your hands. (Pause) Thank you. The motion is carried. Joanna, do you have the precise wording for the minutes?”

In Closing

An effective meeting Chair acts as an orchestra conductor by waving the baton (recognizing members to speak), bringing out the best in every member, and orchestrating productive discussions and quality decisions that reflect well on the group.