



# Preparation and Techniques to Avoid Meeting Chaos

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December’s article reviewed the importance of establishing meeting rules and the chair’s (mayor/village president) role to “preside” over a council/board (the body) meeting. This month the focus is on how a chair can use a two-step process to effectively “preside” over a meeting. Step One is pre-meeting preparation and Step Two is practical steps to deal with common meeting issues.

## Step One - Pre-meeting Preparation

Before each meeting, a chair should understand each agenda item. S/he might also consider how body members may address an issue and interact with the other body members (and staff), thus influencing the body’s meeting discussions.

Pre-meeting preparation can help the chair anticipate how each member might react to various agenda items. One technique a chair can use for pre-meeting preparation is the Topic, Outcome, Process (TOP)<sup>1</sup> approach. TOP was initially developed for use by facilitators. A facilitator creates safe environments where people can identify and solve problems, plan together, make collaborative decisions, resolve their own conflicts, and self-manage as responsible adults. In attending facilitation training, I was struck by how similar the chair’s

Agenda Topic Discussion item	Outcome What are the desired results?	Process How to engage all members to reach the outcome?	Time Anticipated time needed (In minutes)
Previous Minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Receive any corrections, discuss as needed and then approval</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask for revisions</li> <li>Approve by motion</li> </ul>	3
Road Construction Contract Approval	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hear Public Works Committee recommendation</li> <li>Understand the change</li> <li>What are the collective impacts, benefits, and concerns?</li> <li>Decide</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff presentation</li> <li>Are there impacts for area businesses?</li> <li>Are there community-wide issues?</li> <li>Other</li> <li>Board discussion</li> <li>Decision</li> </ul>	15
Building Purchase approval	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hear staff recommendation</li> <li>Understand the need for purchase, benefits, and concerns</li> <li>Decide</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff presentation</li> <li>Other?</li> <li>Board discussion</li> <li>Decision</li> </ul>	20

role is to that of a facilitator. I see TOP as a useful tool to assist a chair in thinking about the meeting and considering how members may react to each agenda item. The table (above) is for the chair’s use only, strictly as her/his tool to keep the meeting on time and track. Illustrated above is an example of how to use the TOP tool. A chair may adapt this tool as best fits her/his needs.

## Step 2 - Practical Steps to Deal with Common Meeting Issues

This month, we will cover two of the common meeting rules and decorum issues that typically occur.

## Member(s) Do Not Understand the Meeting and Decorum Rules

The chair should see that each member (especially new members) has a copy of the body’s meeting and decorum rules (rules) and has read the rules to know their role. This approach should help the chair maintain order by reminding the member(s) about the body’s rules. For the first meeting of the body, a chair may wish to review these rules to begin the first meeting when there are newly elected officials. Similarly, a chair can use this approach before a discussion of a potentially contentious item. Doing so

should help remind the members and the audience of the expected behaviors.

**Motion Discussion - Keeping Track of Who Gets to Speak and When**

The chair controls the discussion. To assist the chair, one commentator offers: “I instruct the members that if they wish to speak, please raise their hand and make direct eye contact with me to ensure that I have written down their name. I write the names down in the order they seek recognition. Then I go down the list and call on people.”<sup>2</sup> A chair could also use a preprinted list, noting each body member. Some municipalities use electronic boards that assist the chair in keeping track of member speaking requests and voting.

Roberts Rules of Order Newly Revised, *In Brief*, 2nd ed. (RONR *In Brief*) suggests that the motion maker usually speaks first. Then the chair should alternate, as possible, between those for and against the motion. For example, the chair would ask:

“Does anyone wish to speak in favor of the motion?” Once that person has spoken, then ask, “Does anyone wish to speak who is against the motion?” Then continue alternating until everyone who wishes to speak has been able to do so. Also, the chair should recognize someone who hasn’t yet participated, before recognizing someone who has already spoken (RONR *In Brief* p. 30).

Under RONR, each member may speak to a motion two times for no more than 10 minutes each (RONR pp.387-90). A body may wish to consider a local rule that creates a shorter total limit. Further, for a specific meeting or topic, the chair or a member can ask the body to set or waive a speaking time limit by special rule or agreement to waive the rules. Remember, to do either requires unanimous consent or, if voting, two-thirds majority. (RONR p. 390).

Remember that the chair is responsible for enforcing the time limit(s). The

chair may want to appoint a timekeeper (clerk or similar person) to help track a member’s discussion time. Doing so helps maintain order and provides visible fairness by ensuring everyone gets the same speaking time.<sup>3</sup>

I will address additional meeting rules and decorum issues in February’s “For the Good of the Order.”

*Sources:*

Roberts Rules of Order, Newly Revised, 11th Ed.

Roberts Rules of Order, Newly Revised, *In Brief*, 2nd Ed.

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Share your meeting rule/parliamentary procedure suggestions or questions. Email Daniel at [daniel.foth@wisc.edu](mailto:daniel.foth@wisc.edu)

1. Adapted from Kaner, *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, 2011 and adapted by Germann Consulting, 2014.  
 2. Nancy Sylvester, “Control the debate, control the meeting.” American Bar Association, Leadership Institute, Summer 2011.  
 3. Adapted from Roger Schwarz, “Five Ways Meetings Get Off Track and How to Prevent Each One.” Harvard Business Review, May 5, 2016.

**Legal Captions**

**Employees 356**

HR Matters column by Lisa Bergersen discusses various aspects of lawful hiring practices including: equal employment opportunity laws, the Wisconsin Fair Employment Act, and prohibited discrimination against protected classes. (Published in the December 2019 *The Municipality*.)

**Employees 357**

HR Matters column by Lisa Bergersen details required factors for employees to come within white collar/ executive, administrative, professional (EAP) exemptions from Fair Labor Standards Act’s overtime requirements, including salary thresholds and duties requirements.

**Elections 608**

Legal comment answers common election-related questions: whether persons can run for more than one local office at the same election; which municipal offices are filled by election; what are standard terms of office for elected municipal officials and how can terms be changed; when referenda are binding or advisory; what are charter ordinances; and what is a village caucus.

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