

Meeting Management

*Justice and courtesy to all,
One thing at a time,
The rule of the majority and
The rights of the minority*

Decision-making for Regional Economic Development Boards (REDBs) occurs at bi-weekly or monthly meetings. These meetings must be efficient to ensure that the business of the Corporation moves forward and the contributions of volunteers are meaningful. The work of subcommittees takes place during more informal meetings. If certain rules are not adhered to, if the planning and preparation for meetings is not carried out, and if meeting facilities are not well designed, the board becomes inefficient and distracted. Good meetings are an end result of the following:

1. Planning and preparation;
2. The efficient disposal of business;
3. Open participation with adherence to the rules of parliamentary procedure; and
4. The assignment of responsibility and effective follow-up on decisions.

Preparation

Good meetings are the result of good preparation. If time is to be spent productively at the meeting, those who make preparations have a responsibility to ensure that directors have prior access to documents and materials. The documents consist of minutes of the previous meeting, an agenda for the upcoming meeting, copies of any reports or correspondence to be discussed, and background materials on new items to be addressed. Organizers should prepare the meeting room to ensure that directors are not distracted during debate and should anticipate an action plan for the implementation of decisions expected at the meeting.

Minutes

Every organization should follow a practice of forwarding copies of the minutes of the previous meeting to all directors prior to the meeting. This provides continuity, refreshing a director's memory on what has been discussed and what decisions have been taken. It also allows him/her to identify what needs to be carried over from the previous meeting.

In many meetings, the reading and adoption of minutes from previous meetings consumes too much time. Time can be saved if the organization creates the expectation that directors will come to the meeting prepared. Business arising from the minutes should be itemized so that meeting time can be used more productively.

Reports

In most meetings, there will be reports from committees and staff on issues that require the board's attention. If organizers circulate or present these reports for directors to review prior to the meeting, the directors can simply adopt them without too much discussion, provided there are no questions or clarifications needed. Lengthy and unnecessary discussion defeats the purpose of reports that were prepared presumably by someone with some level of knowledge or expertise. Furthermore, it is unfair to expect directors to make decisions about information they have just received. They should be given the courtesy of having the information for study and review prior to being expected to make decisions.

Correspondence

Those responsible should make correspondence available before the meeting so that people may browse for themselves, noting issues requiring clarification. There is no need to take time for the secretary to deal with individual pieces of correspondence and the participants to ask questions which may be dealt with outside the meeting.

Director Preparation

Directors must also take responsibility for being prepared for meetings. This includes awareness of the topics being discussed, of the development context for the topics, and of the positions of their stakeholder groups on the topics. They should arrive at the meeting early to review documents that have not been circulated. They should be prepared, when the meeting starts, to engage in debate and make decisions. The organization cannot take total responsibility for how well individual directors are prepared.

Meeting Environment

Organizers should also pay attention to the meeting environment. They should ensure the availability of a bright room with adequate lighting, comfortable heat levels, good air circulation, and a seating arrangement that promotes participation. As well, they should ensure that all members can see each other and that no one is so far removed that they either cannot hear what is being said or cannot be heard when they speak. Any seating arrangement that resembles that of a theater, church, or school creates the impression that the meeting is designed for one-way communication.

The meeting room should be opened early so that people can arrive beforehand to chat, view documents, and become acclimatized to the room. When people attend meetings, they usually have other business to address. By having an opportunity for discussion prior to the meeting, people will not try to do business during the meeting and will not be distracted by others who try to address unresolved issues.

The Meeting

Setting the Discussion Levels Through the Agenda

In the initial stages of their operations, REDBs tried to proceed without an understanding of their mandates. Before they went through the strategic planning workshops, many REDBs operated in a management mode. In the absence of a strategy, directors felt a need to accomplish something. In their efforts to achieve early results, they resorted to spending most of their time on treasurers' reports. They soon found this to be unproductive and directed that the executive officers address such matters. Soon board meetings were consumed with holding the executive accountable for every detail and expenditure. This, as expected, created frustration among the directors, and many were questioning their roles. As soon as many of the directors spent some time identifying their mandates and how they should proceed, this confusion disappeared. Progress was evident when directors started planning their approach to establishing a vision and developing a mandate for achieving it. This example shows that, if given the opportunity, any group will operate with the available information until overcome by frustration. This will result in internal conflict and probably resignations. The REDB, therefore, has a responsibility to ensure that this does not happen by providing information, discussing and deciding on courses of action, and setting a mission.

New Business?

The real reason most people come to meetings is to discuss and debate courses of action. Unfortunately, most agendas have an entry called new business which is lacking in content and direction. Usually, before the adoption of the agenda, the chair will ask for suggestions for new business, and these will be added. This sends a message that the board has no course of action planned but is dependent on directors to bring individual interests to the table. To overcome this, the board should add policy and strategic issues to the agenda before circulation, demonstrating that there is a defined purpose for the meeting beyond accountability and that the board wishes to move forward.

Another approach to this section of the agenda is to have a series of motions listed so that directors are aware of what they are expected to debate. In most instances, we approach any agenda topic first with debate, followed by a motion, any amendments to the motion, and, finally, a vote. Parliamentary procedure dictates that debate begins with the proposing of the motion, followed by debate, and concluding with a vote. This approach also helps the chair ensure that the discussion is on the topic. Without a motion, there is no clarity about the topic, amendments cannot be proposed, and the chair is reluctant to rule any debate out of order, since there are few guidelines for the discussion.

Role of the Chair

Responsibility for the efficient running of the meeting rests with the chair. While everyone has some responsibility for a well-run meeting, the chair will, in the end, make the greatest contribution to the success of the meeting. The chair must ensure that all discussion is orderly, that every individual has an opportunity to participate, and that a decision is made on each topic before proceeding. The chair must ensure impartiality during discussions, maintain an open mind, and not influence the final decision. If, for any reason, the chair feels compelled to join the discussion, other than to provide factual information to the assembly, or to express an opinion, he/she must vacate the chair during discussion on the topic and ask another director to chair the meeting. When that topic is dealt with, the official chair may resume the position and continue with the meeting.

The use of a gavel in chairing meetings will ensure that the chair will not have to try to get attention by competing with other directors. A timely strike of the gavel on the desk will get people's attention. The chair should take advantage of the secretary's note-taking. If in doubt about the wording of a motion or an amendment or who has spoken, the chair should ask for help and not try to interpret what others have said.

Role of the Secretary

One of the busiest people at the meeting is the recording secretary. This person is responsible for taking notes, documenting progress and procedures, and eventually producing a set of minutes that accurately reflects the decisions made by the assembly. The secretary is responsible for having copies of the bylaws, policies, and previous minutes available should members of the assembly require them during the course of the meeting. Responsibility for correspondence, the Corporation seal, and meeting notification also rests with the secretary.

Minute-Taking

There are as many approaches to taking minutes as there are people who take them. Some people have a tendency to take very detailed notes that attempt to capture all the discussion complete with the names of those who made the comments. Others just record decisions, and still others try to summarize discussion in point form. In deciding on the best method, we should ask what minutes are designed to achieve. Minutes are, when signed by the officers of the meeting, the official record of decisions and proceedings. They belong to the assembly and, therefore, should not list individual points of view.

Minutes should be consistent and follow a format. In writing minutes, the secretary should record the date, time, and place of the meeting and make a list of those in attendance and those who are absent. The minutes should include the exact wording of a motion complete with the name of the person who proposed it and, if necessary, the person who seconded it. While this is the only requirement for minutes, the organization may wish to record all discussion verbatim or stop anywhere in between. Perhaps a better approach might be to record a motion with mover and seconder, the major points of discussion, and the final resolution. To maintain the confidentiality of the assembly and those who participate, the minutes should not include the names of those who express particular points of view unless they insist. This may be necessary if a member or director wishes to go on record as not supporting a particular motion or course of action. Before the minutes become the official record of the assembly, the officers must adopt them at the next meeting and sign them as the official record of proceedings.

Parliamentary Procedure

An effective chairperson must have a working knowledge of parliamentary procedure. Every group activity has rules for operation, and a meeting is no different. The rules relating to meetings have been developed over hundreds of years in legislatures all over the world and have been formalized. The most popular set of rules for conducting meetings is that written by General Henry M. Robert, referred to as *Robert's Rules of Order*, which is a simplification of the rules relating to American legislative practices.

The business of the assembly is conducted and organized through the use of motions or resolutions. The motion is introduced, and a second person must agree to it before the assembly can debate it. This second person, referred to as a seconder, shows that the issue is significant to more than one person and that the assembly should debate it. When the motion has been properly moved and seconded, it becomes the property of the assembly, and, therefore, the assembly must dispose of it.

During the debate, members may wish to add to, alter, or delete from the motion without changing its main intention. This is done by introducing amendments to the motion. Amendments are designed to address issues related to the main idea or main motion which, during the course of discussion, may become apparent. Any member may introduce an amendment which, if seconded, the assembly debates and votes on before it resumes discussion of the main idea or motion. There may be as many as two amendments associated with the main motion at the same time. In this case, the second amendment must apply to the first, and the assembly must vote on it first. The next step is to vote on the "amendment as amended" and, finally, on the main motion.

Privilege Motions

Motions fall into four categories. Motions may be in the category of “privilege,” which means that they are of such major importance to the assembly that it must act on them immediately. Motions that fall into this category are motions to fix the time of the next meeting (highest order) and to adjourn (second highest order) and questions of privilege (third highest order). A participant may interrupt the speaker to raise a question of privilege, since it is of such importance to the meeting.

Incidental Motions

The next highest category of motions is referred to as “incidental motions.” Motions in this category take precedence over the main motion or any subsidiary motions but yield to motions in the above category. These motions may be requests for further information, answers to questions, or anything else that should be dealt with before the vote on the main motion. Motions in this group include motions to appeal, to renew, to withdraw, or to call for the vote to be conducted in a particular way. Finally, if a member feels there is a procedural problem, he/she may rise on a point of order.

Subsidiary Motions

Subsidiary motions have no purpose in themselves and apply only to the main motion under debate. Motions in this category include motions to amend, to refer, to postpone, to close debate, or to table. All of these, with the exception of the motion to close debate, are designed to temporarily dispose of the main motion.

The Main Motion

This is the main question or topic the group will debate. To prevent confusion, there can be only one main motion before the group at any time. It also stands to reason that members cannot introduce a second main motion while there is a motion before the group.

Decision-Making

There are generally two accepted approaches to decision-making in meetings. In some cases, it may be sufficient to get a simple majority of those voting in agreement. In other cases, the assembly may wish to ensure a higher level of support for a course of action and, therefore, may continue debate until there is a greater level of commitment or a consensus on the approach to be taken.

Majority Decision-Making

The easiest approach to decision-making is to conduct a majority vote on any topic being discussed. After debate, the chair calls for a vote to determine who is in favor of a specific course of action and who is against such action. The result of the vote is the final position of the meeting and directs the course of action to be undertaken. Either the bylaws of the organization or the particular rules of order being used identify the type of majority necessary to decide on specific action. Most decisions require a simple majority of members present. Therefore, 50 percent plus one of the members or directors voting for a certain course of action carries the decision. Other decisions that have a more serious impact may require two-thirds or three-quarters of the voting members to be in favor.

This is a fairly efficient approach to addressing issues and ensures that after each member has had an opportunity to present his/her point of view, the decision is made and members can move to the next topic. But there are also some potential problems that should be identified. When a vote is taken and there is a simple majority, the minority may feel left out. There may be a concern that issues have been unnecessarily rushed or that the majority is so small there may be problems maintaining support for implementation.

Consensus-Seeking

An alternative approach to majority decision-making is to try to reach consensus on a topic before moving on. A consensus approach has different criteria and is less structured and, therefore, may be more time-consuming than the majority decision-making approach just discussed. In the end, the added time might be worth it if the decision has more support because of the different type of commitment shown. This approach does not follow the formal approach intended in *Robert's Rules of Order*.

In a consensus process, the group is committed to finding some common ground through fact-finding and face-to-face deliberations. While everyone may not be in agreement with the decision, every participant in the process commits to supporting that decision. The need for creativity and innovation to solve problems is the group's primary concern. This places less importance on the role of the chair and more responsibility on all participants for ensuring order, effectiveness, and democracy.

In undertaking a consensus approach to decision-making, members should observe certain principles:

- a. The process should be inclusive and open so that all those with a significant interest in the outcome may have input.
- b. Participation should be voluntary with all participants having access to relevant information and an opportunity to participate.
- c. The process must be flexible and diverse, allowing for differing points of view, participants, and different traditions and cultures.
- d. There must be accountability on the part of and commitment from participants. Those at the table are usually representing constituencies and, therefore, must be both held accountable for their actions on behalf of their constituents and committed to following through on their behalf.
- e. There must be mutual respect and empathy shown while conducting these deliberations that value individual thought and work in the best interests of all parties to the process.

Bibliography

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