

## **THE PERFECT ONE-HOUR MEETING**

It's late. You want to go home. You were promised the meeting would only take one hour. It's now three hours later and still no end in sight! So how can organizations keep meetings at one hour? Simple. Know the rules of meeting procedures and follow them vigorously.

First, plan an Agenda which means "thing to be done" in Latin. An agenda is like a menu for a family get-together. If you were going to have twelve people to dinner, you would first plan what you are going to serve for dinner. You would get out your recipe books, see what ingredients that you need, go through the cupboards and refrigerator to see what you had on hand, and then make a list of those things that you will need from the store. If you were a smart shopper you would put the items on the list in the order that you buy them in the store. That way you would save time in shopping.

An agenda then is a plan for a meeting. The President and Secretary get together and see what needs to be accomplished at the meeting. The menu is the standard order of a business meeting as listed in Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, which is:

1. The reading of the minutes
2. Reports of Officers and Boards
3. Reports of Standing Committees
4. Reports of Special Committees
5. Special Orders
6. Unfinished Business and General Orders
7. New Business

But you don't have to do all these topics at each meeting. You only put on the agenda what you need to do. If you knew only five people were coming to dinner you wouldn't plan for twelve. So when planning a meeting, the President and Secretary need to put on the agenda only those things that need to be done.

Where do you get the information to put on the Agenda? The first place to look is the minutes and the agenda of the previous meeting. Find all the "unfinished business", not "old business". (It may be old and going on for many meetings, but it is never called "old business". It is always called "unfinished business.") Unfinished business like leftovers may not be that fun to have again, but they must be dealt with before you serve anything new!

The minutes should tell you what happened at the last meeting and what will carry over to this meeting. Things that carry over are: any motion that was left pending or undecided at the last meeting; any motion that was postponed to this meeting or referred to a committee to report at this meeting. The first two motions are put on the agenda under

"unfinished business". A motion referred to a committee is assigned to the agenda under "committee reports". Any motion that was not voted on at the time of adjournment will be the first item under "unfinished business."

The next step is for the President or Secretary to call the committee chairmen, officers, or board members to see if they have anything they want to bring up at the meeting. These items are put under the appropriate headings.

Then list the topics of new business. Were there items of new business on the previous meeting's agenda that weren't taken up? These would then be the first on the agenda. Next add any other items of business that you know about. Also leave space and time for the members to bring up their own new business.

Finally, check the governing documents for things done at certain times of the year: such as nominations and elections, annual Christmas Party or fundraising project. These come under special orders because they are set in the bylaws to be discussed at a certain meeting. (Or you can do this first. Just be sure to check your governing documents for certain things that are to be done.)

Second, follow the agenda. Have you ever gone to the grocery and forgot your list? You think you remember what you need so you bravely go ahead and start shopping. Soon you see something that looks appetizing and decide to include that in your grocery cart. By the time you reach the check out, it's filled with goodies, and you feel pleased because you're sure you've gotten everything that you need. But when you get home, you discover that the most important things that you went to the store to buy.

At meetings if you forget your agenda, or don't have it, or don't follow it, you won't get the most important things done. And that meeting that was only supposed to be an hour long may become two or three hours long!

The Time Saver Agenda – the Consent Agenda. Just like we have fast foods so we have a time saver agenda. Often there are non-controversial items to come up at a meeting. This might be the payment of usual bills, customary donations, or approval of printed minutes. These can be put on a consent agenda adopted at the beginning of the meeting. This does not replace the regular agenda, but it is a way to dispose of certain things quickly so the members can get to what is important.

A consent agenda allows members to adopt a group of items en bloc without discussion. When it is presented to the members, the chair asks if any member wants to extract any item from the consent agenda and place it on the regular agenda. To extract an item, the only action a member needs to do, is rise and ask for it to be removed. It is then placed on the regular agenda. Everything left on the consent agenda is approved by a majority vote. The members then proceed to the order of business on the regular agenda. A lot can be accomplished when the group votes for the consent agenda.

Third, have the perfect one-hour meeting. All this takes is planning, preparation, and the strong desire to do it. Here are some key tips for accomplishing this:

1. Have a plan. Have a carefully written agenda. Call the officers and committee chairman to see what they want to put on the agenda. Adopt a rule that members must submit agenda items in writing or call the secretary before the meeting to have business included in the agenda. Put on the agenda only those items that you know are going to happen. After calling all the committees, if no one has a report, don't ask for committee reports. Take that order of business off the agenda. If there is no unfinished business then don't put it on, and don't ask for it. If you have done your preparatory work, you will know whether there is any unfinished business. Take up business as it is presented. If a committee has a motion to make at the end of its report, take it up at that time and not under new business. Ask the committee chairman to give you a written copy of the motion so that it can be incorporated into your meeting script. Finally, ask the people who have reports to sit in the front and be prompt in rising and giving the report when the chair calls on them.

2. Prepare for the meeting. Ask these questions:

- a. "What do we want to accomplish at this meeting?" Put an emphasis on this. Make it a high priority.
- b. "Can certain things be done more efficiently by a committee with final approval by the members?" Don't waste the assembly's time by having it act like a committee.
- c. "Can other things be done by a consent agenda rather than having them taken up one at a time?" Put routine matters on the consent agenda.
- d. "Can we assign time limits to each agenda item?" Yes, give each order of business a time allocation. Write it bold print by each agenda heading. Then have the assembly adopt the agenda. When the time is up, the assembly must decide what to do vote on it, postpone it to another time, or refer it to a committee. No more spinning your wheels! Go forward.
- e. "Can we limit the amount of time each member speaks?" Adopt a rule at the beginning of the meeting that limits a member's debate to three or four minutes each time he or she speaks.

f. "Can we make a motion at the beginning of the meeting that states the time that we adjourn?" Yes, you can!

3. Give the presiding officer the agenda several days before the meeting so that he can practice out loud what he is going to say. Or better yet write a meeting script for the presiding officer to read.

4. Carry out the plan. At the meeting, call it to order promptly at the designated time.

a. Insist that the members write each motion on a piece of paper and give it to the chair. This saves time in having to reword motions.

b. Insist that they follow the rules of debate:

Each member must obtain the floor – that is rise and be recognized by the chair before beginning to speak. (In groups under twelve, and depending how the meeting room is arranged, it may not be necessary for the member to rise, but to raise his hand instead to be recognized by the chair.)

Members keep discussion to the topic.

Members can only speak twice to each motion unless the members adopt rules that are different.

c. Educate the chair about when to take the vote. Don't let silences drag on, if no one is rising to speak, take the vote.

d. Don't let the members deviate from the agenda or the discussion at hand.

5. These ideas mainly apply to assembly meetings, but many of these points can also be adapted to committee and board meetings.

Now, if you will follow these points consistently, religiously, vigorously you can have the perfect, one- hour meeting.

**Reference:**

Robert McConnell, Registered Parliamentarian  
Robert McConnell Productions  
HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATIONS  
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