

# How to Be a Great Chairperson

by Nathan Garber

*Selena was the longest-serving member of the board and one of the founders of the organization. It seemed only reasonable that she should become the next president. It didn't seem to matter to anyone that as a board member, she had frequently initiated lengthy discussions on topics that had nothing to do with the organization. She was elected unanimously. During her two-year term as president, the length of monthly meetings averaged four hours. Beyond approving the minutes, practically no other decisions were made as Selena's view of consensus decision-making appeared to be that no vote could be taken until everyone agreed with her.*

Maybe you have been at one of Selena's meetings or have suffered through a meeting like these ones. When people complain about meetings, it is often because of a poor chair. This is not surprising as all too frequently, the job of board or committee chair is given to the director who offers the least resistance.

Whether you arrived in the role of meeting chair by virtue of your bright ideas, your winning personality or because no one wanted the job, you need to recognize that you are the person most responsible for making board members feel that their participation is valued and helpful to the organization.

It is not easy to make every meeting productive and enjoyable but you can do it. Being a great chair involves five sets of tasks:

1. carefully planning the meeting;
2. involving other directors in the process;
3. making everyone feel important;
4. facilitating a productive meeting process; and
5. enforcing the meeting rules.

This article provides a brief outlined of what is involved in each of these tasks.

## 1. Plan for Success

Great meetings happen by design, not by accident.

When you attend any successful event, whether a theater, sporting event, fundraiser, or conference, it is readily apparent that most of the work has been done before the event. You can't put on a successful event without plenty of preparation. Board meetings are no different. It takes planning and work between meetings to ensure that the necessary decisions can be made fairly, with adequate discussion, in a reasonable amount of time. Good meeting planning requires attention to the following:

- Ensure that the meeting has a purpose. The purpose of board meetings is to make decisions. If there are no decisions to be made, don't waste people's time.
- Provide information needed for decisions in time to be read before the meeting. Meet with the executive director and/or executive committee at least a week before each board meeting to review the reports to be given and the decisions to be made. Don't just send out a generic, pro-forma agenda. Make sure the board's meeting package includes sufficient background material and that board members receive the material at least a few days before the meeting.
- Ensure a *quorum* will be present so the meeting can take place. If there have been attendance problems or people arriving late, contact them before the meeting to let them know their presence and their opinions are important.
- Prepare an agenda that can be completed in the time allowed. After reviewing the matters for the

meeting, consider how long to allow for discussion of each item. Assess each potential discussion item in terms of its urgency and importance. Is a decision absolutely required by the end of the meeting? How significant is the impact of the decision on the organization as a whole. Make sure that the most urgent and important items get priority on the agenda.

- Critically review past meetings to see how the next one can be improved. Meetings don't get better on their own. Review past meetings to see what you can do to make them more effective, more efficient, and more fun.

## **2. Involve the Team**

The executive director needs to be involved but should not be the only person planning the agenda. A great chair knows that planning, running, and evaluating meetings is too much work for the chair to do alone. It takes an executive committee. If you don't have an executive committee, create a meeting planning committee to meet between board meetings to review recent meetings, plan the agenda, follow-up with absent directors and compile reports and minutes for distribution. Use the opportunity to help prepare the next chair for the job.

## **3. Make Everyone Feel Useful**

Volunteers will only do what gives them some satisfaction. Volunteer board members will come to board meetings when they feel they are making a contribution. If they don't feel necessary or respected, nothing will get them to attend meetings. A great chair creates a respectful environment, invites participation and encourages all directors to present their views. It is very important to ensure that the agenda items require everyone's participation. It is demoralizing and disrespectful to spend precious meeting time listening to reports that do not require action or discussing decisions that have already been made. If decisions do not require the full board to be involved, delegate them to an officer or committee.

## **4. Facilitate Decision-Making**

I hope you'll excuse me for reiterating that the purpose of board meetings is group decision-making. Groups may come together for many purposes, but board meetings are for making decisions that require the involvement of all directors. A great chair ensures that the agenda is designed to facilitate group decision-making. The chair keeps directors focused on the agenda and brings discussion to a conclusion when it is clear consensus has been achieved or it is time to vote.

## **5. Learn and Enforce the Rules of Order**

Procedural Rules are not an imposition. They are essential. Most everyone wants board meetings to be informal and friendly but without rules of order, discussion may wander, meetings may go into overtime, quieter personalities may not have an opportunity to participate, and disagreements may turn into personal attacks. A great chair knows, explains, and enforces rules to ensure civility, participation, and fair decisions. This does not mean that you should slavishly follow Robert's Rules of Order. For most volunteer boards, General Robert's rules are overkill – intended to keep order in an adversarial environment, not to facilitate collaborative decision-making. Much better for most of us is to have a few clear and simple standing rules that can be displayed on a poster at all meetings. Here are some basic rules, compatible with generally accepted parliamentary procedure.

- A member must be recognized by the Chair before he or she can speak.
- No one can speak twice on a matter until all have had opportunity to speak.
- The Chair may set time limits for discussion. These can be changed by a majority vote of the Directors.
- No disrespect towards others will be tolerated.
- Only urgent items may be added to agenda.
- Conflicts of interest must be addressed.
- The Chair votes with the other members (depending upon your by-laws).

If you don't have clear and simple standing rules, you should allocate some time to create and approve them.