

Robert's Rules are Most Valuable when People Disagree

Purpose : Explain how parliamentary procedure keeps strong disagreements fair, focused, and productive.

Each year, we take a few minutes to discuss Robert's Rules of Order and why we use them. This year, let's focus on when the rules matter most: when a discussion becomes contentious.

Imagine that our board is considering eliminating a long-standing program because of budget constraints. Some members believe the program is central to our mission. Others believe continuing it would jeopardize the organization financially.

Without an orderly process, the discussion could quickly become personal. People might interrupt one another, repeat the same arguments, or attempt to prevent an unpopular viewpoint from being heard.

Robert's Rules give us a better way to manage that disagreement.

First, a specific motion must be made. Instead of debating whether the program is good or bad, the group considers a clear proposal, such as: "I move that the organization discontinue the program at the end of the fiscal year."

Now everyone knows exactly what decision is before the group.

Second, members debate the motion, not one another. Remarks are directed to the chair, and the chair recognizes one speaker at a time. Members may challenge the facts, the costs, or the wisdom of the proposal, but they should not question another member's motives or character.

Third, the rules protect both sides. Members who support the motion and members who oppose it must have a fair opportunity to speak. A forceful speaker does not receive more rights than a quiet one, and the majority cannot simply silence the minority because it is impatient.

Suppose the discussion reveals that ending the program immediately would create a hardship. A member could propose an amendment to continue the program for six months while alternatives are evaluated. The organization can then improve the original proposal instead of being limited to a simple choice between keeping the program forever or ending it immediately.

If someone interrupts repeatedly or makes personal accusations, a member may raise a point of order. That is not an attack on the speaker. It is a request for the chair to enforce the rules and return the discussion to the issue before the group.

Finally, the members vote. Once the vote is taken, the decision belongs to the organization, not merely to the members who prevailed. Those in the minority retain the right to disagree, but everyone should respect the decision-making process.

Robert's Rules do not eliminate conflict, nor should they. Healthy organizations will sometimes have strong disagreements. The purpose of parliamentary procedure is to ensure that those disagreements are handled fairly, respectfully, and efficiently.

In short, Robert's Rules help us disagree without becoming disagreeable. They protect the right of the majority to decide, the right of the minority to be heard, and the right of every member to participate in an orderly process.

That is why we use them.