

Highlights from **THE COMPLETE HANDBOOK OF BUSINESS MEETINGS** By Eli Mina

General Information

The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings is a comprehensive guide to meetings and rules of order. The book's author, Eli Mina, is a professional meeting facilitator, Registered Parliamentarian, and a leading expert on meetings, shared decision making, and rules of order. He has been in business since 1984.

The book is practical and contains many easy-to-use ideas, tools and scripts that can help transform and boost the effectiveness of meetings. It can help make your meetings more productive, inclusive, dynamic, and even enjoyable. It also demystifies and humanizes the rules of order and helps you use them in a logical and "people-friendly" manner. It eliminates the focus on minor technicalities and replaces archaic and confusing language with plain English.

The book is organized into ten chapters. Here are highlights from the various chapters:

Highlights from Chapter 1 Healthy meetings and effective decision making

A prerequisite to a healthy meeting is a healthy organization, with a clear and compelling mandate, logical governance and reporting structures, and visionary and principled leaders who listen and who are "in tune and in touch" with internal and external stakeholders.

Meetings are costly (in both monetary and non-monetary terms). Your organization deserves a substantial return on investment (ROI) in a meeting. If a good ROI is not achievable, you should question the need to hold the meeting, or look for less costly methods of facilitating discussions and making collective decisions.

There are 3 decision making models: autocratic, majority-based, and consensus. The autocratic model is efficient but not inclusive. The majority-based model is inclusive but - if not handled well - can create winners and losers and thereby divide the organization. Consensus is more inclusive but can be slow and - if not handled well - can become "the tyranny of the minority".

There is a risk in rushing to solutions in meetings before the problem has not been fully explored. Pre-mature solutions may solve surface problems (symptoms) while leaving the real issues (root causes) festering.

Highlights from Chapter 2 Ten key ingredients of a successful meeting

Most people can easily identify what they hate about meetings. But that's not enough. To have a successful meeting, you must also identify affirmative criteria and key performance indicators with which to measure its effectiveness. Here are 4 of the 10 key ingredients to look for:

Clarity: The group's mandate, the purpose of the meeting, the issues at hand, and the parameters of the decision making process must be clear. Members must know what difference they are mandated to make and what stakeholders they are serving. When they vote, they must do so with nothing less than the full understanding of proposals and their impacts.

Order and decorum: In an orderly meeting, only one member speaks at a time. Interruptions are avoided, except when absolutely needed. Regardless of how contentious the issues are, civility and mutual respect are maintained. Discussions are "hard on the issues" but "soft on the people".

Balance and fairness: An "even playing field" is established, with each member having the same opportunity to speak and influence the collective decision making process. Domination by outspoken members is prevented, and efforts are made to engage quieter members in the deliberations.

Variety and a light touch: Predictable and monotonous meetings are replaced by ones which are varied, dynamic, engaging, invigorating and even fun! As a result, members look forward to meetings instead of looking for excuses to avoid them.

From time to time, your group should assess the effectiveness of its meetings against the ten key ingredients. Engaging the members in such assessments will heighten their awareness of the need for productive meetings and will increase their commitment to this goal.

Highlights from Chapter 3 **Preventive and visionary planning**

Planning efforts should be geared to prevent problems, but also to achieve positive results and a good ROI. With good planning, the meeting will have all ten key ingredients in chapter 2. Planning should be proactive and deliberate so that "prime time" (meeting time) will be well spent and deliver the value that your organization needs and deserves.

"Off-the-cuff" meetings (called with little or no notice) are an unfair imposition on members and should be avoided. In addition, documents should be circulated to members well in advance of the meeting. They should be reader-friendly: concise, logical, clear, well organized, and using plain language.

Agenda items should be screened based on their relevance to the group's mandate and their readiness for profitable discussions and decision making. The ultimate decision on whether to include an item on the agenda rests with the group (democracy) and not with a persistent member (anarchy, or a "free-for-all") nor with the meeting facilitator (autocratic regime).

Last minute additions to the agenda should be the exception and not the rule. If there are disagreements on whether an agenda item should be added, this question of whether the item will be included or omitted should be put to a vote: "Those who want to add this item to the agenda raise your hands. Thank you. Those who prefer to postpone it to the next meeting raise your hands. etc."

Agendas should include more than just the issues that **must** be discussed ("reactive" components). They should also include issues that the group **wants** to discuss ("proactive" components, typically drawn from the group's long term vision or strategic plan). Proactive agenda items will make meetings interesting and attractive to attend. Members will look forward to them, instead of looking for excuses to avoid them.

Guest speakers should be advised in advance of specific questions that they should address to provide the greatest value to the decision making process. They should also be informed of when they will speak and for how long, and how they will be alerted that their time is about to run out.

Tensions and disputes that can harm the productivity of the meeting should be addressed proactively before the meeting begins. Opponents of a proposed initiative can be invited to propose alternative proposals or amendments that would preserve the strength of an initiative while addressing legitimate concerns.

The "rush-hour-syndrome" (squeezing half the agenda into the last 10 minutes of a meeting) should be avoided. Prepare timed agendas, monitor the clock, and remind members of time constraints from time to time (e.g.: "As we agreed earlier, we need to end this discussion and vote at 11 o'clock. That's 10 minutes from now").

Highlights from Chapter 4 **Empowered and proactive members**

Individual members can be their own worst critics, They often defer to others for initiative and leadership. They sometimes trivialize the importance of their insights ("Oh, it's not that important") or their capacity to influence outcomes ("It won't make a difference. Their minds are already made up"). In fact, individual members can make all the difference in the world.

The principle of shared responsibility means that each meeting participant - and not only the Chair - is responsible for the success of the meeting. Members should avoid sitting back and suffering, and should intervene to ensure that the meeting is properly conducted. "Suffering is optional".

Interventions by members should be brief and principle-based. To soften them, try closing with a question mark: "Can we please get back to the agenda?" or "Can we please let individuals finish what they are saying?" or "Can we hear from only one person at a time?"

It takes courage to intervene, and you - as a member - may feel too nervous to do so. However, if you do intervene to improve the conduct of the meeting you will likely receive your reward when the meeting ends: "Thank you so much for speaking up. I was hoping someone would...".

Every effort must be made to convert each member from a passive spectator to an active contributor, and from "a critic" to "a creator". This can be achieved by giving each member a lead role on an agenda item (to make a presentation or facilitate a discussion), or by calling on quieter individuals to speak: "Jack, you have unique expertise in this area. Can you help us out?"

Highlights from Chapter 5 **A masterful facilitator**

The Chair's greatest enemy is the word "I". Instead of imposing decisions, the Chair should facilitate collective decision making. Instead of speaking and responding to every statement, the Chair should listen, build consensus and identify decision making options.

The Chair should ascertain the wishes of the group regularly, especially when a dispute occurs. The wishes of group can be ascertained formally ("Those in favor of placing a \$500 limit on this purchase please raise your hands") or informally ("Is there general agreement to extend the discussion on this issue by 10 minutes? Any objections?").

The Chair's overall duty is to manage people, issues, and time, and to create the appropriate balance between these three entities. If the Chair accommodates people too much, issues may not receive proper attention and time may be wasted. Conversely, being too focused on closure and time limits can cause people to be left behind and be less supportive of the outcomes.

In managing people, the Chair should ensure that members are heard and treated with respect, and that discussions are focused on issues and not personalities ("Would you give the person speaking the same respect and attention that you want when you are speaking?").

In managing issues, the Chair should keep the members on track: "We are now discussing agenda item 7. Is the proposed computer purchase appropriate for our company?". The Chair can also slow the group down and bring to

their attention potential flaws in the decisions that they are about to make: "Can we slow down for a bit? There are a few impacts of this decision that we did not look at yet".

In managing time, the Chair should monitor the "hour glass", remind members of time constraints ("We have 5 minutes left for this item") and discourage repetition ("Does anyone have something to add, and - if not - shall we proceed to the vote?")

The Chair is usually entitled to debate issues without "leaving the Chair". However, the Chair should participate on the same basis as other members: "I will add my name to the speakers' lineup", or "I want to speak for the second time. Is there any first time speaker on this issue?"

Unless the Chair is prevented from voting by the governing documents (statute or bylaws) she or he is usually allowed to vote and is not limited to doing so only in the event of a tie. A tie vote simply means that a motion is defeated. The Chair's vote could even create a tie and thereby cause a proposal to be defeated (see further in chapter 7).

Highlights from Chapter 6

Surviving the contentious meeting

Most people dread contentious meetings and see them as something "to survive". But that's not a good return-on-investment. Instead, such meetings should be viewed as opportunities to address difficult issues, lead to healing and reconciliation, and re-focus the organization on its mandate.

Never attribute to malice what can reasonably be attributed to a misunderstanding or a systemic gap. Never assume that people are adversarial, insensitive or uncaring, even if their behavior suggests so. Genuinely listen to them and seek to address legitimate concerns they may have. Treat them as reasonable people. and they will eventually act as such (believe in "self-fulfilling prophecies").

Dissenting opinions are not something to panic about or stifle. Treat them as "different pieces of the truth that we need to have prior to decision making". Celebrate diversity of opinion and treat it as an asset and not as a liability. If everyone thought and acted the same way every time, it would not be a very interesting organization, would it?

When encountering disruptive behavior, use the "carrot" approach first (e.g.: "May I ask you to keep your comments to the issues, not the personalities?"). Revert to "the stick" approach only when it is abundantly clear that this approach is not working.

The ultimate "stick" is taking a vote on how things should be handled. For example, if there is a dispute on the inclusion of a "surprise" item on the agenda, avoid arguing with the proponent. Instead ask: "Those in favor of adding this item to the agenda raise your hands, etc.". Let the majority govern and give the members (collectively) the decision making power that they deserve.

Highlights from Chapter 7

Rules of order that make sense

The purpose of the rules of order (or "parliamentary procedure") is to facilitate progress, not to impede it (as they often do). Their purpose is also to protect majority rights ("the majority rules") and minority rights ("the minority must be heard"). They are intended to include members in collective decision making on an "even playing field", with each member having the same opportunity to speak and influence the decisions. Rules of order should not have the effect of frustrating, confusing or intimidating people or impeding progress.

The most unfortunate thing is when a meeting is bogged down in procedural arguments, sometimes at the insistence of "nit pickers" or "closet parliamentarians" (people who claim to have in-depth knowledge of rules of order). The fact is that "a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing".

There is a crying need to replace the archaic language and the rigidity of the rules with a simple, logical, plain language and people-friendly approach. There is nothing inherently wrong with saying "I propose that ____" instead of "I make a motion". Instead of "I move to table" you can say "I move to postpone this decision until the next meeting". Instead of "calling the question" say "Are we ready to make a decision yet?"

For most motions to be adopted a majority (or "a simple majority") is required. A majority is typically defined as "more than half of the votes cast". Under this definition, a tie vote means that the motion is defeated. There are times when the governing documents (statute or bylaws) impose a super-majority requirement (like a 2/3 or 75% vote) in specific cases. A board cannot impose a super-majority requirement without amending the bylaws, since this could violate the majority's right to rule.

An abstention may count in one of three ways: If the statute or the bylaws do not impose a specific interpretation, an abstention is not counted at all (not as a positive vote and not as an affirmative vote). However, some statutes or bylaws state that "a majority of those present" is required to adopt a motion. In this case an abstention has the effect of a negative vote. On the other hand, other statutes or bylaws stipulate that an abstention is counted as a vote in the affirmative. Check your statute or bylaws, and don't let the most outspoken members tell you how to count an abstention.

The process of introducing a motion is not significant, and there is no need to insist that every proposal be moved and seconded. What is significant is the exact wording of the proposal, the fact that it is opened for debate and amendment, and that the wishes of group on it are ascertained.

The decision to close debate is not made unilaterally by the Chair or by one member "calling the question". The right to debate issues is fundamental in a healthy collective decision making process, and can only be interfered with by a decision of the group: "Are the members ready for the vote?" or: "Those in favor of closing debate now raise your hands. Those opposed raise your hands. etc."

There is a myth that no discussion of an issue can take place until a motion is on the floor. In fact, the group can decide to discuss an issue informally first (exploring the nature of the problem) and only then propose a solution (or an appropriate motion). Insisting on a motion before the problem is fully defined is equivalent to putting the cart before the horse. You may end up solving the wrong problem.

A point of order is a complaint that a rule of order is being violated. Points of order should not be raised on minor technical violations which have no impact on progress and do not violate anyone's rights. There is no such thing as a "procedurally perfect meeting". As long as the business gets done and basic rights are respected, "nit picking" is a counter-productive nuisance (Chapter 7 includes tools and scripts to combat procedural nonsense in meetings).

Highlights from Chapter 8

Accurate and useful minutes

Minutes are the official record of a meeting. They should primarily contain an account of what took place and the decisions that were made.

Recording every word that was uttered should be avoided. It creates lengthy, useless and confusing minutes, and may lead to wasteful arguments at the start of the next meeting: "I didn't say this". "Yes, you did". "But I didn't mean to...". Word-for-word (verbatim) minutes can also become a disincentive to spontaneous and free flowing discussions, as members become guarded about what they say for fear of being recorded in the minutes.

The essence of discussions can be captured in point-form summaries and without reference to "who said what". If the same point was made by 5 different people, it should only be recorded once. Example: "The main points in favor of the motion were: _____. The main concerns about it were: _____. After discussion and amendment, the following motion was approved: _____".

Secretaries are often at the receiving end of demands by vocal members: "Why didn't you put this in the minutes?". To prevent such uncomfortable situations, the group should approve minute taking standards. The secretary should then follow these standards (democratically approved) and not the wishes of individual members (which would amount to anarchy or a "free for all").

Minutes should be objective. They should reflect a collective - and not personal - focus. Names of movers and seconders of motions are insignificant and should not be recorded in the minutes.

Highlights from Chapter 9

The virtual meeting

With the advent of high technology more and more organizations are reducing the number of face-to-face meetings and replacing them with virtual meetings. Like actual meetings, virtual meetings should enable a group to share information and facilitate collective decision making.

Options for virtual meetings include teleconference calls, videoconferencing and e-meetings (presentations and interactive discussions facilitated on-line). Other options include separate telephone consultations or fax or e-mail exchanges.

A virtual meeting usually has the advantage of being less expensive than a face-to-face meeting. The cost of travel, meals and accommodation is eliminated. In addition, members are not inconvenienced by needing to disrupt their schedules and struggle through unpredictable traffic patterns.

Although virtual meetings can work well for small groups, they are very difficult to manage with large gatherings. It is also difficult - if not impossible - to employ interactive discussion techniques in a virtual meeting (e.g. breaking into small discussion groups), when such techniques can be very productive when issues are complex or controversial.

Virtual meetings present unique challenges: How do you identify who is speaking? How do you , establish a speakers' lineup? How do you ensure equality and fairness? How do you count votes? How is a secret ballot vote conducted?

Highlights from Chapter 10

Troubleshooting guide

Before intervening to cure a meeting ailment (such as rambling, digressions from the agenda, or side conversations), it helps to know the root cause of the ailment. Without it, your intervention may be inappropriate or even worsen the situation (Why prescribe major surgery when an aspirin will do?)

Verbal interventions should be phrased in the affirmative. Say what you want done instead of what should be avoided. "Stop interrupting" can be replaced by "Can we please let people finish?".

An intervention to cure a meeting ailment does not have to be verbal. To stop a side conversation, you can ask the person who is speaking to pause. You can then be quiet for a few seconds. The silence will likely compel the parties to the side conversation to stop.

It is best to avoid threats ("If you don't stop ___, I will ask you to leave"). Instead use the "carrot approach". Treat individuals with respect and entice them to participate constructively. Be firm (on issues and principles) and soft (on people). Your principled attitude will likely perpetuate itself.