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“WHAT ARE WE VOTING ON?!”

Parliamentary Procedure Basics: Conducting Meetings Efficiently and Effectively

If you've ever found yourself saying that in a meeting, your group may benefit from understanding and utilizing basic parliamentary procedure. This article will outline the basic benefits of adhering to rules of procedure and how to apply them to your meeting so that business is transacted clearly and efficiently. I have served as the parliamentarian advisor for several boards, including the Hawai'i County Council and the Hawai'i County Charter Commission.

Using Rules of Procedure to Ensure Fairness and Accuracy

Parliamentary procedure is a method of conducting business via the will of the majority without suppressing the voice of the minority. Whether your organization uses Robert's Rules of Order or your own rules of procedure, the basic premise is that the rules are there to help you conduct business, not hinder it. Rules of procedure exist so that the will of a majority of the group can dictate the course of action through voting, while at the same time affording the minority an opportunity to voice their position and do their best to convince members to their side. In order to transact business, a *quorum* is necessary, and this is usually 50% of the membership plus 1 more person. This ensures that a majority of the group is present to transact business.

All too often I have heard groups discuss a matter for 30 minutes or more before someone asks “what are we voting on?” Nobody has any idea and the discussion loses its focus, resulting in a meeting lasting much longer than it needs to be. The Rules of Procedure guides the discussion through the use of motions so that the group knows what is being voted on, and any discussion must be related to that topic.

The Basics of Parliamentary Procedure and putting it into Practice

This is where it gets fun. If you take just one thing from this article, it should be this:

Motion → Second → Discussion → Vote

That right there will help you get through a majority of meetings much quicker as explained below.

Key Players

Before getting into the use of motions and voting, it is important to know the role each person is to play in a meeting. Some key players are:

Chairperson – This person is the one running the meeting, whether as the president, chairperson, executive, or whatever title it may be. It is this person's job to keep the group on track and to ensure the rules are enforced. Typically the chairperson should not take part in the actual discussion of the matter before the board unless authorized because of the need for the chairperson to be neutral and unbiased in the proceedings.

Additionally, the chairperson typically does not vote on a motion unless it is to break a tie.

Vice-Chair – In the absence of the chairperson, someone should be designated as an alternate and specifically empowered to serve in that position when required. This gives legitimacy to the actions of the group in the absence of the chairperson.

Secretary – This person records the minutes of the meeting. Keeping motions simple and the discussion on topic makes this person's job much easier, and they will thank you for it.

The Group – The main body's role is to discuss and vote on courses of action for the organization.

The Agenda

When it comes down to transacting business the first thing that is necessary is an *agenda*. This lets the group know what needs to be accomplished for this meeting. Depending on your group it may be necessary to have a detailed agenda, such as with government boards and committees, or it may be very simple with very little information. I do not recommend the latter for any group due to it being overbroad.

Main Motions

Once the agenda is issued and the meeting begins, it is time to make a *motion*. The primary question presented to a group is called a *main motion*. A *main motion* is a proposal that should be voted on by the group and should be kept as simple as possible. A motion should always be phrased in the form of a positive, so that a "yes" vote supports a specific course of action and a "no" vote denies that action. For example:

Good Motion: I move that we approve XYZ Company to perform our system upgrade.

Bad Motion: I move that we disapprove XYZ Company to perform our system upgrade.

The difference is slight, but it will drastically alter the course of the *discussion*. In the "Good Motion" it is easier to remember that a "yes" vote supports utilizing XYZ Company for the system upgrade, and a "no" vote rejects XYZ Company. In the "Bad Motion" scenario, however, a "yes" vote *rejects* XYZ Company, and a "no" vote does not necessarily *approve* XYZ Company for the system upgrade. In the "Bad Motion" scenario, after either way the vote goes, there is still no resolution on who should do the system upgrade, whereas in the "Good Motion" situation, a "yes" vote will at least reach a decision that can be acted upon.

After a main motion is made, you will generally hear a *second* to the motion. This is another person who supports that there should be a discussion, but may not necessarily support the motion itself. Once a motion is made and seconded, discussion may take place.

Discussion

Any discussion by the group on any motion must be *germane* to the question presented. This means that the discussion must go towards the merits of the motion, whether it should be approved or disapproved, and why. It is the chairperson's job to keep the discussion on track and rein it in if it is straying too far. Discussion on matters by the group may be limited by the Rules of Procedure, such as by length of time that may be used by any one person or by the number of times any one person may speak on a matter. This helps to move the conversation along and prevents any one voice from dominating the conversation. Again, it is the chairperson's duty to maintain order and enforce these rules.

Secondary Motions

Secondary motions are motions made after a main motion, but before a vote on the main motion takes place. The most common *secondary motion* is a *motion to amend a main motion*. Using the scenario of XYZ Company, it would flow like this:

Main Motion: I move that we approve XYZ Company to perform our system upgrade.

Secondary Motion: I move to amend the main motion by replacing XYZ Company with 123 Company.

The question now before the group is whether 123 Company should replace XYZ Company for consideration. All discussion should be focused on whether 123 Company is a better choice for the system upgrades than XYZ Company. If the group votes “yes” on this secondary motion, then 123 Company replaces XYZ Company in the main motion, and the main question before the group becomes “should we approve 123 Company to perform our system upgrade?” If the group votes “no” on the secondary motion, then the original motion stays the same.

Voting

In any scenario where *voting* takes place there are various ways to accomplish this. Some common methods of voting are as follows:

Voice vote – The chairperson will ask who votes “yes” or “aye” and who votes “no” or “nay.” The chairperson will determine which side had more votes and declare that the decision.

Roll call – This differs from a voice vote in that each member of the group will have their name called individually for their vote and their vote will be logged next to their name.

Rising vote – With a rising vote, members of the group are asked to stand to indicate whether they are voting “yes” or “no.” This is similar to a vote by raise of hands.

Unanimous consent – Unanimous consent does not mean a unanimous vote. What it means is that nobody in the group opposed the measure or asked for another voting method. This is typically seen in situations where the chairperson asks the group “is there any opposition to the motion?” And if seeing or hearing none, the measure is adopted by unanimous consent.

These various methods of voting are available to the group and may be used for different effects. The ultimate goal, however, is to reach a decision. The chairperson puts a motion to a vote by the group and determines which side has more support, and then announces the result. Once a vote is taken and confirmed by the chair that matter is disposed of and the meeting moves on.

Conclusion

While it may seem daunting to put all of this into practice, utilizing just the basics of parliamentary procedure provided above will help many groups transact business faster and more efficiently. There are much more nuances and intricacies that can be used in the rules of procedure that are beyond the scope of this article. If you have any questions, would like for me to review your rules of procedure, or observe a meeting and make recommendations, please feel free to contact me at levi@hookanolaw.com today.