



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

## MONTHLY LETTER

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### *On Conducting a Meeting*

*Revised  
city*

**I**F you have been chosen to be chairman of a meeting it is because your group believes that you have the required qualities. Only reasonable care and a lot of goodwill are needed to enable you to do a creditable job.

Keep your approach to your chairmanship positive and constructive. Group discussion is the base upon which action is built by all our government, business, civic and social groups. Your function is to see that the discussion proceeds smoothly.

Common sense is needed. Without it no set of rules will keep you on the beam. Good planning is necessary, for without it you cannot guide your meeting smoothly toward its objective.

Running a meeting is like putting on a show: it has to be rehearsed in your mind and then staged properly. Unnecessary detail must be edited out of the script; unimportant action must be speeded up; every participant must be given an opportunity to say his lines.

If the gathering is anything except a business or professional conference or an annual meeting it demands the relaxation of governance expected in a democratic get-together. This is where the art of chairmanship shows itself.

In a business gathering the general manager may be chairman and speaker and time-keeper, wielding total authority, but in a community or club or association meeting the chairman needs to use his personality and social skills to accomplish the meeting's purpose and send the participants away satisfied with their contribution.

#### *Preparation*

Don't start worrying the moment you accept an invitation to be chairman: start preparing. That is the main assurance of a successful meeting, and it is the most potent antidote to stage fright.

Think of the happy position you will be in if you have planned well in advance along these lines: you

have briefed those who are to help in conducting the meeting, such as the secretary, the chairmen of committees, and other officers, so that they know when and how to make their contribution; you have the agenda of the meeting arranged in orderly fashion; you have determined that you will apply rules and tact so as to bring out proposals and ideas in the clearest possible manner, consideration of the proposals in the fairest possible way, and decision about ideas in clear unmistakable language; and you have anticipated the meeting's reaction to every item so far as is in your power, so as not to be caught unprepared for eventualities.

To aid you in this important organization of your meeting, why not make up a "Take it apart" sheet? You write at the top of a piece of paper the idea that will be debated, or the resolution to be considered. Draw a line down the centre of the page and write on one column "in favour" and on the other "against". Then put your mind to work to anticipate and make a note of every fact and feature you can imagine as an argument pro or con.

You will arrive at your platform chair with more knowledge than anyone in the room of what is likely to be said, and this helps you to keep control. You will also be in position to suggest points overlooked by the audience, giving an opportunity for well-rounded discussion and consideration.

Have facts at hand, not to trot out gratuitously but to fill gaps. Make sure that there is someone present who has detailed knowledge about the project under consideration, or experience in the course proposed. Obtain whatever pertinent booklets are available, not with the idea of reading them to the meeting but so as to have authoritative material at hand to answer questions and spark discussion.

Do not rely upon your native intelligence to provide you with spur-of-the-moment comments and debate-

starters. As Nathan Sheppard wrote in a long-forgotten handbook for public speakers: "the best improvisations are improvised beforehand."

Always keep the members of your audience in mind. What sort of people are you to preside over?

Some will turn up at meetings with only existential knowledge of the problem on the agenda: they know there is a problem. Others will bring essential knowledge: they know there is a problem, they know its nature, and they have examined into it.

### *Duties of the chairman*

To put it in its shortest form, it is the duty of the chairman to plan and prepare necessary business, present it to the meeting, and carry out the policies decided upon.

Keep the minds of your audience open and running, not stagnant and idling. Try to avoid wrong turns and detours, and suppress the tendency some people show toward dead-end debates. You can accomplish these desirable purposes very neatly by rephrasing statements that might be misunderstood, sifting out the irrelevant comment, and summing up the points which mark progress.

Your own interest in every statement and person should be constantly evident, though it is not your place to talk often or at length. Your job is to get the ideas of others out for an airing.

Give your full attention to your audience. You can strike dumb the most eager speaker if you assume an attitude of kingly reign or one of judicial distance. You can ruin a meeting by consulting your secretary or riffling through your portfolio of papers while a speaker is addressing you.

Here, in a sentence, is your duty as chairman: listen carefully to what is being said, seize illuminating suggestions and point them up, combine similar ideas expressed differently, reconcile divergent opinions, clarify statements when they may be misunderstood, and sum up step by step to mark progress toward a solution.

Should it happen — and it will happen in the best circles — that several matters suddenly appear before the Chair under the umbrella of the one being discussed, do not hesitate to call a halt to the proceedings while you disentangle them.

You must not allow informality to obscure the importance of what is being done. Your usefulness depends upon your authority as director of the meeting. You have been given that power for a purpose — the purpose of directing the meeting so as to accomplish some desired end with fairness to everyone who seeks to take part in the deliberations.

### *Presiding gracefully*

It is one thing to be praised for the efficiency of your chairmanship, and that is worth while, but it is equally desirable to be praised for the grace with which you presided.

Let the audience be ever so small, or the circumstances ever so disheartening, the chairman must perform his role with credit to himself and his art. What you need is not critical scholarship in the rules of order, but a human feeling for what will be most satisfying to participants.

There is no room here for spuriousness. Your art must be valid. Manner and demeanour are not frivolous but vital.

We all know chairmen who are disciples of efficiency, whipping through a multitude of items in jig time. We know, too, how often we have come away from their meetings with a feeling of incompleteness, of non-participation.

Courtesy is needed as well as accomplishment. Courtesy takes off the sharp edge of power. It observes the niceties, while preserving the decorum, of debate. It detects impending conflict and moves in to avert an open clash. It never shows annoyance. It opens the door graciously for face-saving when a speaker has crossed the boundary of good taste.

### *Keeping up interest*

Fundamental in keeping up interest is to stir participation. When a meeting seems to be lackadaisical try a little mind stretching. Throw out a question that is allied to the topic but a few steps ahead of the current discussion. Try to push the right button to bring out the interesting and helpful things that might be contributed by people in your audience who have not yet spoken. Show interest in a warm, enthusiastic way.

One helpful question to use when the audience seems dormant is this: "What will happen if we decide this way?" Put some expectation into your voice — some people can talk about the joys of Utopia in such a manner as to make us disgusted with them.

Get your audience into the habit of rising to speak. Sitting still keeps people's minds quiet; getting on their feet sets their minds in motion.

When the meeting is formal, all remarks must be strictly relevant to the question being discussed, but in most meetings some latitude may be allowed. The chairman, however, must be alert to halt any speaker who wanders too far from the subject. Not only does the digression waste time, but it befools the issue. One good way to bring a discussion back on to the track is to summarize what has been said to date.

Don't allow a person to speak twice on the same topic until all others have had a chance to contribute their opinions. Control the loquacious and draw out the diffident. In extreme cases ask the talkative person to give others a chance. Say: "While we're on this point, let's hear from some of the others."

### *Handling conflict*

No matter how well dispositioned the people at your meeting may be, you are likely to run into conflict. Not alone policies and plans collide, but personalities.

You may find that the supposed problem before the meeting is being used by opposing sides in their effort to gain dominance. Much that passes for discussion is merely the noise made by contending propagandists. Your recourse as chairman is to keep discussion to the facts before the meeting on this particular issue. Enforce the rule that all speakers address the Chair, even though they may wish to question or answer something said by a previous speaker.

The crank, or the person with delusions of the greatness of his thoughts, is difficult to handle. His emotions drive him into imagining that he is being persecuted when you hold him to the accepted customs of debate. When people like that throw sharp beligerent barbs at you or direct them toward some other member of the audience, try to take off the barb with a laughing comment and a restatement.

If passionate discourse breaks out, seize the conflicting arguments in both hands and display them so that they become clarified. State precisely, in a few words, what you understand to be the contentions of each of the disputants. Apparent contradictions will often turn out to be merely ambiguities. Make sure that everyone is talking about the same fact, event, person or proposal. Many disputes and confusions fade away when the key words are defined.

### *About rules of order*

The rules of order, whether framed by Bourinot, Roberts or your own group, have at heart the rules of common decency: that everyone with something to contribute be allowed to speak; that nothing too distressing be said; and that obedience be given to whatever conventions are applicable to the occasion.

You represent the corporate authority of the meeting in bringing about certain desirable results: providing regulated opportunity for every person to state his views; insisting upon fair and meaningful discussion; protecting the rights of the minority and the majority; providing the means for decision making; working toward the ideal of a unified front after differences have been resolved.

You will be assisted toward success if you avoid applying the rules in a dictatorial way. A gentle nudge

toward conformity is often all that is needed. You are not at your best when you say merely: "It's in the book." Explain, so that all in the meeting will know, why the rule is necessary and why you are applying it in this case. He who is persuaded feels that he has gained something; he who is compelled believes that he has been despoiled of something.

### *Holding a meeting*

The objects of an organized discussion are to identify problems that mean something to the group and to get at the issues which must be considered for solutions or decisions.

The meeting is more than the sum of its members, because members interact; they stimulate and exchange ideas. It has been calculated that the possible minimum combinations of a group of twelve persons total 2,102. Stuart Chase says picturesquely in his book *Power of Words* that many small threads of language weave these persons together in a fabric of relations from member to member "like lines of force in a magnetic field."

Begin your meeting in a confident, eager mood. Suggest in specific and definite terms the nature of the expected outcome — a decision about this or a resolution to do that. Outline the alternatives as you see them, but do it factually, without in the slightest way, by words or inflection, taking sides.

After disposing of the minutes of the preceding meeting by adopting them, or amending them if necessary, and the unfinished business arising out of the minutes; approving accounts; receiving reports of committees and reading essential correspondence, you reach the items under "New Business" on the agenda. Pertinent items from committee reports and correspondence will have been referred to this item.

Strictly speaking, the solution of a problem or the reaching of a decision should be introduced to the meeting in the form of a motion, and then seconded, and then opened for discussion and possible amendment, and then voted upon. Under parliamentary procedure, there can be no debate until a question is before the meeting in proper form.

Nothing frightens an amateur chairman so much as an amendment to an amendment. A first amendment is easy to handle: it must not say "no" to the motion, but only vary it in some detail; it must not introduce entirely new matter (which belongs in new motions); it may leave out certain words, add certain words, or delete certain words and replace them by others. These same rules apply to an amendment of the amendment.

Here is an example: the motion is to give \$100 of the group's funds to the Red Feather agencies; the amend-

ment is to delete "\$100" and substitute "\$150"; the amendment to the amendment is to delete "\$150" and substitute "\$50 at this time and \$100 spread over the next five months." You call for a vote on the amendment to the amendment; if it carries, then the main motion is automatically carried as amended by the double amendment. If it is defeated, you call for a vote on the amendment; if it carries, the original motion is carried as amended. If the amendment is defeated, you put the original motion. That is the simplest way. Some authorities say that after the various amendments are voted on you ask: "Is it your pleasure to adopt the motion?" Or, if an amendment carried: "... to adopt the motion as amended?" In any case, you should read the motion in its final form before calling for a vote.

You should consult your by-laws to make sure of any special requirements as to voting. Some resolutions, particularly those affecting money, qualifications for membership and changes in the by-laws, may require a two-thirds majority. If there are twelve qualified voters, and eight of them vote "yea", the motion carries.

Normally, the chairman does not vote except in the case of a tie. Then, says a bulletin about procedure at meetings issued by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, "he customarily votes against a motion on the assumption that if half the members are opposed, the matter should not be forced upon them."

Some motions have special privileges. A motion to adjourn or to recess may be made at any time. It must be seconded, but it is not debatable, except when it is sought to adjourn to a time other than the regular meeting time, when discussion is permitted on that point only.

There are only two legitimate ways to interrupt a member while he is speaking: the point of order and the question of privilege. The first applies when a member feels that improper language has been used, irrelevant argument introduced, or a rule of procedure broken; the second is called into use if a member feels that his own or the organization's reputation is endangered.

The chairman decides these without debate, though he may ask for opinions. If the member disagrees, he may appeal, in which case the chairman states his decision and the point of appeal, and puts the question: "shall the decision of the Chair stand as the judgment of this meeting?" This is not debatable, and a simple majority is sufficient to decide.

### *Closing the meeting*

Having covered all the items on the agenda, you inquire if there is any other business. If any matter is

raised that is relevant to the purpose of the meeting, see that it receives adequate attention. If there is no response, declare the meeting closed. No motion is needed.

One thing at least remains to be done, and it is most important. The minutes of a meeting, the record of things done and the decisions reached, are of great concern to the continuing health of the organization. They must be factual and impersonal, accurate and complete.

Keeping the minutes is usually the job of the secretary, but the chairman must assure himself that the record is well kept. Some chairmen send copies of the minutes to members soon after the meeting so as to inform them about what happened if they were not present and to give those who were present an opportunity to catch errors which can be corrected at the next meeting.

### *Sources of information*

This quick glance at the techniques and aids for meetings makes no pretence at completeness. All rules may be used separately or in many combinations according to the nature of the group, the temperament of the participants, the idiosyncracies of the chairman and the requirements of the occasion.

Every chairman finds that his greatest success will come when he works out an agreement between his internal convictions about how things should be run and the external circumstances of the occasion. He will take of common sense a sufficient quantity, add a little portion of the rules and orders of the group, and apply this prescription to the meeting with a certain elegance.

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*References:* The authority on Canadian procedure is *Rules of Order* by Sir John G. Bourinot, available through your book store or direct from the publishers, McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto. A handy pocket-sized book for quick reference is *Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies*, by Henry M. Robert, available through your book store. Everything needed by the chairman is told in *The Conduct of Meetings*, an excellent guide written by G. H. Stanford and published by the Oxford University Press, Toronto, at the very modest price of \$2.50. The Adult Education Division of the Department of Education, Regina, Saskatchewan, publishes *How to Conduct Better Meetings*, while its namesake in Halifax, Nova Scotia, publishes *Making Better Meetings*. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce has issued for its members a *Bulletin About Duties of a Chairman*. *Procedure at Meetings in Canada* by Arthur Beauchesne is published by Canada Law Book Co. Ltd., Toronto.