

OVERVIEW OF ROBERT'S RULES OF ORDER

Original version: Matt Traum, July 2002
This revision: Eric Weese, April 2007

MOTIVATION

Some people believe that rules of order delay business by requiring unnecessarily bureaucratic procedures. This may be the case if such rules are misapplied, but the correct use of rules of order can actually speed business by ensuring that consistent and well-understood procedures are followed.

In the case of the GSC, rules of order make the Executive Committee more accountable to the Council and encourage greater involvement by representatives. The use of these rules also gives greater weight to decisions taken by the Council.

This document is intended to provide an introduction to Robert's Rules of Order, aimed at those who have little experience with parliamentary procedure. Robert's Rules are by far the most popular rules of order for organizations like the GSC, and their use is specified in the GSC Bylaws. Several copies of *Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised* (RONR) are available in the GSC office: this document is nothing more than an extremely short summary.

PHILOSOPHY

A deliberative assembly has the following essential characteristics:

- It is a group of people meeting to determine, in full and free discussion, courses of action to be taken in the name of the entire group
 - The group is of such a size that a degree of formality is necessary in its proceedings
 - The members are ordinarily free to act within the assembly according to their own judgment
 - In any decision made, the opinion of each member has equal weight as expressed by vote
 - Failure to concur in a decision of the body does not constitute withdrawal from the body
 - The members present at a properly called meeting act for the entire membership
- [RONR p.1]

The General Council is the only part of the GSC that displays all these characteristics. Meetings of GSC committees and other groups generally do not follow Robert's Rules, instead relying on more informal procedures.

RESOLUTIONS

A deliberative assembly generally makes most of its important decisions by voting on resolutions. The member of the assembly who introduces a resolution is called the sponsor. In addition to a sponsor, resolutions must have a 'second': another member who believes the resolution should be considered. Resolutions contain two sections: an optional preamble and a motion. The preamble provides basic background and describes why the resolution should be adopted. The motion is what will be enacted if the resolution passes.

To give an assembly time to consider a resolution before it is debated and voted upon,

'previous notice' may be required. In the GSC, notice must be given for all resolutions at at least one meeting prior to the one where voting will take place.

BASIC PROCEDURE

All business in deliberative assemblies is conducted through the **Chair**, who is responsible for ensuring that the basic rights of all members are upheld by running the meeting in an objective, judicious fashion. As an objective facilitator, the Chair does not express any opinion on the business that is being conducted. If the Chair to give his or her opinion on an item of business, another member must take over as Chair until that item is complete.

The Chair ensures that the meeting follows a specified **agenda**, unless special circumstances arise. An example of an agenda would be the following:

- Approval of Minutes
 - Unfinished Business
 - Old Business
 - New Business
 - Committee Updates
 - Open Floor
- [RONR p.342]

For any official business to take place at the meeting, there must first be a **quorum** of members present. In the case of the GSC, quorum is a majority of members. A meeting cannot start until quorum is reached and, after a meeting begins, if the number of members present falls below quorum any member can make a quorum call and prevent further business from being conducted. Retroactive quorum calls are not allowed: votes taken are valid unless there is clear and convincing proof that there was no quorum at the time of the vote. Such proof is generally impossible in the case of the GSC, since a member could have not voted and then later snuck out of the room.

An assembly without quorum can either wait until a quorum arrives, or adjourn the meeting automatically. Simply put, business cannot be conducted without a quorum.

Once a quorum is obtained, and business begins to be considered, the Chair can **recognize** members, thereby allowing them to speak. The distinction of being selected to speak is known as **holding the floor**. A member who holds the floor can introduce a resolution. After this, other members who are given the floor can speak on the merits of the resolution in a debate, and make a variety of **motions** if they wish.

Except in special circumstances, members may not interrupt a speaker who holds the floor. The Chair can try to recognize speakers with opposing points of view and, if more than one member wants to speak, they can seek balance rather than mechanically recognizing whichever member is fastest or most obvious. All members can speak once in a debate on a given resolution before anyone is allowed to speak again. Once everyone who wants to has spoken, or the time limit for debate has been reached, the Chair holds a vote.

[RONR p.28]

Voting

Resolutions and motions are decided by a majority vote unless otherwise stated in the Constitution or Bylaws. Although it is the duty of every member who has an opinion on the question before the assembly to express it by a vote, members cannot be compelled to vote.

All members present who do not vote “Yes” or “No” are said to be abstaining. Voting can be done via a variety of methods. In the GSC, the default is by show of hands.

Voting By Ballot

A vote by ballot is used when secrecy of the members’ votes is desired. For example, ballots should be utilized when electing officers. In other circumstances where secrecy is desired, a vote by ballot can be requested by any member through a motion to Vote by Ballot.

Voting By Roll Call

Taking a vote by roll call has the affect of placing on the record how each member voted. In short, it has the exact opposite affect of a Vote by Ballot. If a motion for a Vote by Roll Call succeeds, the Chair calls the roll of members present in alphabetical order. Members may respond verbally in four ways: ‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘abstain’, or ‘pass’. The members’ votes are recorded as the roll continues. Those members who exercise the right to pass will be called again in order when the first round of the roll call reaches the bottom of the attendance list. Members may pass one time only.

Proxies

Generally, proxies are not allowed in deliberative assemblies. The GSC bylaws, however, allow members who are not present at a particular meeting to send an individual to represent their interests. This individual is called a proxy. Proxies enjoy all of the privileges of membership in the deliberative assembly for the session in which they are representing the absent member.

ANY OBJECTIONS?

One of the fundamental purposes of rules of order is to protect the rights of a minority of members. If there is no minority, however, then there are no rights to protect. Thus, if there is **unanimous consent** to a certain course of action, all procedural details can be ignored. Using this technique a great number of non-controversial items can be handled very quickly. The following example from GSC history illustrates this concept:

At the September 2005 GCM, several items of business were on the agenda; however, the preceding week had seen Hurricane Katrina devastate New Orleans and other areas off the Gulf of Mexico. A representative thus wished to immediately establish a task force to examine whether the GSC could make any contributions to the relief effort. The GSC President (acting as the Chair) was familiar with Robert’s Rules, and, using this knowledge, led the meeting approximately as follows:

- 1) A member moved to suspend the rules of order in order to move the Katrina resolution to the top of the agenda
- 2) A vote was held on the motion to suspend the rules and the results counted
- 3) A member moved to adopt a special rule setting parameters for debate
- 4) A debate was held on the parameters for debate
- 5) A vote was held on the motion to adopt a special rule and the results counted
- 6) A debate was held on the resolution
- 7) A member moved to amend the resolution in a few minor ways
- 8) A debate was held on the proposed amendments to the resolution
- 9) A vote was held on the motion to amend the resolution and the results counted
- 10) A member moved to suspend the bylaws in order to vote on the resolution despite the fact that proper previous notice had not been given
- 11) A vote was held on suspending the bylaws and the results counted
- 12) A vote was held on the resolution and the results counted

By the time this lengthy process was completed many representatives had left the meeting. Quorum was lost, and none of the other items on the agenda could be acted on.

Now, consider a potential alternative approach:

“Are there any objections to considering the Katrina item first?” [silence]

“Ok, are there any objections for debating it for five minutes?” [silence]

“Ok, does the sponsor want to start?”

[five minutes of debate, with an amendment proposed]

“Are there any objections to accepting the amendment?” [objection]

“Ok, all in favour of the amendment?” [almost everyone]

“That looks like a lot more than half. Any opposed?” [a few people]

“Ok, motion to amend passes. To hold a vote on this resolution today we need to suspend the normal two-meeting legislative process. Any objections to doing this?” [silence]

“Ok, so we can vote on the resolution, as amended. Is anyone opposed to this resolution?” [silence]

“Ok, resolution passes. Next item of business...”

Not only is this allowed by Robert’s Rules, it is far more in keeping with their spirit: the Rules should protect those in need of protection, but not interfere or delay when there is general consent for a certain course of action. [RONR p.53]

The main exception to this idea of unanimous consent occurs when there is a need to protect the **rights of those not present**. For example, if the bylaws can be amended by a two-thirds vote of the whole membership, then if less than two-thirds of the membership is at a given meeting the bylaws cannot be amended, even by unanimous consent. In this case, the minority being protected by the rules of order is not those at the meeting (all of whom may be in favour of the bylaw amendment), but rather those not attending. Since those absent cannot give their consent, the bylaws cannot be changed. [RONR p.254]

SUMMARY OF POSSIBLE MOTIONS (MORE ADVANCED TOPIC)

While a resolution is being debated, members have at their disposal a set of tools they may use to modify, manipulate, and improve the resolution before it is ultimately voted on. These tools are referred to as motions (the motion contained in the resolution is the ‘main motion’). Any member holding the floor can make a motion. This can happen at any time during debate but motions are considered in a particular order with respect to one another (hence the phrase ‘rules of order’). The order in which motions are considered is directly related to how much they modify or manipulate the resolution being debated. Making a motion of lower rank than the motion pending before the assembly is ‘out of order’, and is not allowed.

Consideration of any motion takes precedence over the resolution before the assembly. In addition, higher ranking motions take precedence over lower ranking motions. If a number of motions are raised, they are considered according to their rank, until they are disposed of. Then consideration returns to the original resolution. In certain cases, motions may be adopted which dispose of the resolution before it can be voted on. If this case occurs, business proceeds to the next item on the agenda.

There are three types of motions, each bearing different characteristics. The three classes of motions are Subsidiary Motions, Incidental Motions, and Privileged Motions. While a brief

description of each motion type is provided here, the appendix of this document includes a table describing the more popular motions along with a brief explanation of each motion. Note that Robert's Rules of Order outlines a number of additional motions, but the motions contained herein have been selected as those generally necessary for the proper conduct of business.

Subsidiary Motions

These motions are applied to resolutions to modify them or dispose of them. Once a subsidiary motion is made and seconded, it must be decided before the resolution upon which the motion was made can be acted upon.

In order of rank from lowest to highest the subsidiary motions are Postpone Indefinitely, Amend, Charge a Committee, Modify Debate, End Debate, Vote by Ballot, Vote by Roll Call, and Lay on the Table.

Incidental Motions

These motions arise when members feel that actions or decisions based on other motions, resolutions, or orders are in opposition to the benefit of the assembly. Incidental motions are made when a course of action being taken seems to be against the will of the majority, and they serve as a mechanism through which such action can be halted before it becomes dangerous or disruptive to the continued proper conduct of business.

All Incidental Motions take precedence over Subsidiary Motions. In order of rank from lowest to highest the Incidental Motions are Appeal, Object to Consideration, Withdraw, Suspend Rules, and Division of a Question.

Privileged Motions

Privileged Motions are in place to prevent the rights of the minority from abuse through the elimination of deliberation time outside of the assembly or by holding members in an assembly past the expected time of adjournment.

All Privileged Motions take precedence over Subsidiary Motions and Incidental Motions. In order of rank from lowest to highest the Privileged Motions are Recess and Adjourn.

A Note on Dilatory Motions

Parliamentary procedure exists to assure that the business of a deliberative assembly is conducted in a coherent, timely fashion. Any motion that is deemed obstructive to the procedure of business is called a dilatory motion.

It is the duty of the Chair to prevent members from misusing motions or abusing the privilege of renewing certain motions to obstruct the flow of business. Consider the example of a disgruntled committee chair who felt he did not get enough funding in the budget. This individual could continuously move that the budget be tabled, against the will of the assembly, obstructing the flow of business.

If the Chair becomes convinced that members are using parliamentary forms for obstructive purposes, he or she has the right to not recognize the members in question, preventing them from holding the floor. However, such a course cannot be adopted to speed up business, nor

should the Chair let personal feelings affect his or her judgment in such cases.

Rising Points

One of the fundamental pillars of parliamentary procedure is to preserve and assure individual rights. Thus, members are empowered to raise points to protect themselves, ensure their understanding of the business at hand, and excuse themselves temporarily to handle pending business.

Because the preservation of members' rights is paramount, members may raise points irrespective of whether the floor is occupied or not. In fact, the only time members are allowed to interrupt the conduct of business is to raise a point. Thus, this privilege should be used sparingly, only when necessary.

Point of Information

Points of Information should be raised when a member of the deliberative assembly knows information fundamental to a resolution or motion being debated that will sway the opinion of the assembly. This point can also be used to correct information that is presented vaguely or incorrectly. In general this point is used to assure that the assembly is educated on a resolution or motion upon which they are deciding.

Point of Parliamentary Inquiry

A member should raise a Point of Parliamentary Inquiry when the conduct of business has become unclear, when he or she wants to inquire as to the affects of a certain motion, or when he or she is unclear as to what outcome a particular vote will have.

EXPLICATIVE TABLE OF MOTIONS

Rank	Name	Type	Description
1	Adjourn	Privileged	End the meeting
2	Recess	Privileged	Briefly postpone the meeting
3	Appeal	Incidental	Open a questionable decision by the Chair to a vote by the assembly
4	Object to Consideration	Incidental	Halt the introduction of a resolution or motion inappropriate for consideration
5	Withdraw	Incidental	Retract a resolution or motion already under consideration
6	Suspend Rules	Incidental	Ignore the rules of order to consider urgent business
7	Division of a Question	Incidental	Vote on various parts of a resolution separately
8	Lay on the Table	Subsidiary	Postpone discussion on a resolution or motion to a later time
9	Vote by Roll Call	Subsidiary	Vote by recorded, verbal roll call
10	Vote by Ballot	Subsidiary	Vote by secret ballot
11	End Debate	Subsidiary	Immediately end debate and go to the vote
12	Modify Debate	Subsidiary	Extend or limit debate on a certain motion or resolution
13	Charge a Committee	Subsidiary	Send a resolution to a committee for review
14	Amend	Subsidiary	Modify a resolution or motion
15	Postpone Indefinitely	Subsidiary	Dispose of a resolution or motion without vote