

FACT SHEET 10: CHAIRING MEETINGS

All meetings need someone to make them run smoothly. Chairing the meeting is generally the role of the President; however, in the absence of the President, one of the Vice-Presidents will chair the meeting.

The chairperson (Chair) has a responsibility to remain neutral, allowing all sides of an argument to be heard, and as many people as possible to speak. Order is vital in a democratic forum where the rights of every individual member should be respected and protected.

If all members had a similar view on all issues there would be no need for the imposition of control mechanisms. Given, however, that P&C Associations are composed of very different individuals with very different values, beliefs, viewpoints and ideas, the need for discussions which are ordered and fair is essential. The Chair must preserve order, including ruling on contentious matters of procedure and assisting the progress of discussion by preventing irrelevant or repetitious discussion or offensive remarks.

Prepare for the meetings

For full and informed discussion, items must be advertised to the school community before being dealt with at a P&C meeting. The President and Secretary agree on the purpose of the meeting and work together to prepare an agenda. Additional agenda items can be dealt with at the end of the meeting in general business, if the meeting agrees, otherwise they may be held over to the next meeting.

The chairperson can be very influential and should be mindful of any indication he/she may give either verbally or visually, that may influence the direction of the debate.

If Chair is not able to remain neutral he/she should step down for that section of the meeting and allow someone else to chair the meeting for the entire course of the discussion on the specific topic.

Hints for chairing meetings

- Stick to the agenda and set a time to finish the meeting.
- Ensure one speaker at a time has the floor.
- Limit the number of speakers on a particular topic.
- Limit the time for speakers for and against.
- Ensure all speakers are heard and their point of view is respected.
- Know the rules. The Chair must apply the rules of the constitution firmly to retain the confidence of the meeting.



- Try to keep the discussion flowing. The Chair may need to remind members what the last issue being discussed was about.
- Make sure that all comments or suggestions are taken seriously.
- Progressive summaries are very useful to keep the meeting on track.
- Prevent confusion by explaining the effect of motions.
- Keep order. Parents can be very passionate about the school and their child's education. This can lead to differences of opinion and clashes of personalities. Sometimes this can be constructive – other times it is not. The Chair needs to recognise when the discussion is becoming unconstructive and bring the meeting and back to the agenda.
- Do not ridicule. People are often unaware that they are dominating the meeting and stopping others from participating. It is the Chair's role to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to put forward their views and that each person is shown courtesy and respect.
- New members may feel nervous and intimidated. Try to bring them into the discussion, asking them for their views.
- To achieve the aim in the allotted time, the Chair should take initiatives such as terminating the debate and putting the motion.
- Create working parties to investigate a larger issue and report back to a future meeting.
- Beware of the development of cliques. The layout of the meeting room may contribute to this. Try alternative seating arrangements, such as a circle, horseshoe and round table formations to produce a more inclusive feeling.
- Contentious issues. If the meeting is going to discuss contentious issues the Chair must plan how to deal with interjectors. One good way is to state at the beginning of the meeting that everyone will get a chance to speak *once*.
- Abusive language and personal attacks on other members are not to be tolerated – the Chair should remind offenders that they are at a public meeting; are not protected by parliamentary privilege and may be subject to defamation action if they persist. If the person still persists, either ask him/her to leave the room or adjourn the meeting for ten minutes.
- When people are distracting the meeting (talking, shuffling papers, tapping pens etc) this usually means they are not interested in what's happening, do not feel included, or feel the issues are irrelevant to them. Make sure the issues being discussed are really necessary and delegate any that do not have to be group decisions to other appropriate committees.
- As a last resort, take a break.

