



On Call

Maintaining civility at board meetings

Most school board meetings tend to be routine and can even be a little boring. But issues do come along that bring out passion and fill the boardroom. Perhaps you need to close a beloved small school as part of budget cuts? Or maybe you want to allow your school-based health center to issue contraceptives?

How do you maintain a civil discourse while discussing these hot-button issues at board meetings?

It can be a challenge. Caught up in the moment, people sometimes get angry, emotional and make personal attacks as they advocate for or against issues they care deeply about. Board meetings can quickly get out of hand if the board doesn't have — and follow — specific rules for conducting meetings.

It boils down to requiring people to treat each other with respect, even when they disagree.

A good first step is to follow rules of parliamentary procedure and in particular Robert's Rules of Order. While these procedures can sometimes seem intimidating and overly formal, they provide a structure for conducting the meetings efficiently and fairly, with participation by the public.

Even when parliamentary procedure is followed, things can get chaotic if the board chair doesn't enforce the rules and demand that speakers show common courtesy and decorum. It's important to keep the discussion focused on the issue being debated and avoid degenerating into personal attacks. The board chair should cut off discussion that becomes too personal or disrespectful and make clear that the behavior is the problem, not the speaker's opinion. Sometimes, if conversations get too heated, the chair might even need to call for a break to give people a chance to calm down and restore order.

Maintaining order is important not only to conducting business efficiently but also to creating an atmosphere where people feel safe to participate. When meetings devolve into loud, rowdy gatherings, many people become afraid to voice their opinion and become the target of ridicule or personal attacks. Some feel physically afraid.

By following established rules and treating all people with respect, the board can encourage active participation in board meetings in a way that allows for robust discussion without turning the meetings into battlefields.

Here are some other tips for maintaining civility at board meetings from the Institute for Local Government (www.ca-ilg.org):

Set a time limit

It's often best to limit the time allotted to speakers to three minutes or some other designated

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amount, so that a particular speaker doesn't dominate the discussion. Assure people they all will be allowed a turn to speak. That can help prevent people from interrupting others out of fear they won't have an opportunity to give their opinion or rebut a comment. To save time, remind people that if a previous speaker has already expressed their views, they could simply say they agree with the previous speaker. The goal is to create a culture where people are respectful of each other's right to voice an opinion and participate in the meeting.

Outline the process

It can help reduce tension if the board chair, at the start of the meeting, outlines the process to be followed, including any limitations on public participation. Let people know if they need to sign up to speak. Review any time restrictions. Remind them to be respectful of others and that you will cut off any testimony that involves name calling or is otherwise derogatory.

Listen, listen, listen

Listening is an important way board members can show respect to speakers, as well as learn what they want to share. Board members should listen with their whole bodies — making eye contact with the speaker, perhaps taking notes. They should show through their demeanor that they are really hearing and trying to understand what the speaker is saying, even if they don't agree with it. Nothing riles the public more than if it thinks the board has already made a decision but is just going through the motions in hearing public testimony.

Separate people from the problem

Name calling, personal attacks and questioning people's motives only raise tension instead of moving the conversation forward. The board chair should immediately stop any discussion where this happens and remind the speaker to focus on the issue, not personalities.

No applause or heckling allowed

Ask people not to clap, cheer or boo the testimony of different speakers. It can be intimidating for people to share views that they fear will draw boos and ridicule. It also can encourage speakers to focus more on getting applause than in making their point in a respectful manner.

Call a recess

If people ignore the rules, start interrupting other speakers and things get out of hand, the board chair should call a recess. A short break can calm things down and help restore order. If a recess does not work, it may be necessary to remove a disruptor from the meeting. Another option is to end the meeting.

Walk the talk

Board members need to follow the same rules of courtesy and respect as they expect the public to follow. These include:

- limiting statements during discussions to those that move the conversation forward
- keeping remarks brief, to the point and non-repetitive of comments others have made (other than to note agreement)
- avoiding personal attacks (in public and private) and otherwise adhering to the strategies described above.