

# THE GUIDE TO BETTER MEETINGS FOR DIRECTORS OF NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

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By Eli Mina

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# PREFACE

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**T**he Canadian Society of Association Executives (CSAE) is delighted to introduce our latest publication developed to meet the needs of associations, their staff and volunteers. The traditional rules of meetings can be too complex for most association meetings. CSAE has published this how-to guide to provide an alternative that replaces confining procedure with effectiveness and simplicity. CSAE hopes to enhance the effectiveness of your association meetings and consequently the experience of all meeting participants.

Authored by Eli Mina, a leading parliamentarian, speaker, consultant and author, this guide is based on his work with hundreds of organizations as well as his recent book **The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings**.

This guide has been developed with the intent that organizations would adopt it as the basis for conducting their meetings. It is succinct and addresses the dual needs of order and democratic participation. It will assist directors and executives of non-profit and similar organizations in planning and facilitating productive meetings. It presents key ideas and insights, and identifies best practices for meetings.

The performance of your Board over the course of the year, and before your membership at the AGM, can be enhanced through successful, effective meetings. Everyone will benefit from winning results.

May this guide launch you on the journey to productive meetings!

*Canadian Society of Association Executives*

# INTRODUCTION

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This guide will assist you and your non-profit corporation in balancing the need for productivity and significant gains in meetings, with the need to include the members in meaningful discussions and decision making. Such a balance will enhance the quality of your collective decisions and deliver better returns on the substantial investment often made in meetings. To help you achieve this balance, a principle-based approach is presented that applies to all meetings, formal or informal. Then a simplified, plain-language approach to rules of order is introduced to demystify and humanize the formal rules, and make them practical, relevant and “people-friendly”.

The information given in this guide is not legal advice. The author is a qualified expert on meetings and rules of order, not a lawyer. If you require legal counsel, contact a qualified lawyer. However, you should also invest your organization’s resources (time, money and talent) in building internal harmony, trust and respect. Ensure that your directors always exercise due diligence and seek to advance the organization’s mandate, and that your Board is in-tune and in-touch with your membership base. A harmonious internal climate will make your members and staff more supportive and eager to help, more willing to forgive innocent errors, and less pre-disposed to pursue adversarial actions against the organization.

This guide does not contain a comprehensive coverage of parliamentary procedure, but does address the most commonly asked questions about rules of order. As you will see in Chapter 5, an excessive focus on rules of order is counter-productive, and indeed contrary to the fundamental purpose of the rules of order, which is

to facilitate progress while protecting basic rights: the right of the majority to govern, the rights of the minority and the individual to be heard and influence the decision making process, and the rights of the absentees and the organization to be protected from abuse. This simplified approach aside, if your procedural needs are complex, you can refer to your favorite book on parliamentary procedure for guidance.

**THIS GUIDE ADDRESSES THE FOLLOWING AREAS:**

Chapter 1 describes ten key performance indicators for meetings.

Chapter 2 discusses the pre-meeting work needed to meet performance objectives.

Chapter 3 focuses on how individual members can help enhance the quality of a meeting.

Chapter 4 outlines the roles and rights of the person chairing a meeting.

Chapter 5 introduces a simplified and “people-friendly” approach to rules of order.

Chapter 6 summarizes principles and guidelines for minute taking.

# CHAPTER 1

## TEN PERFORMANCE INDICATORS FOR MEETINGS

**T**o make a meeting successful, you need **an affirmative vision** of success and a set of performance indicators with which to measure it.

This chapter describes ten performance indicators for meetings. Use them to assess your Board and membership meetings. You can rate your meetings on a scale of 1 to 10 using each of these indicators (1 means “as bad as it can get”, and 10 means “it couldn’t be any better”), and then add up your numbers. The total will be between 10 and 100. Ask other participants to do the same. Compare notes. Compliment each other on the areas that work. Then take corrective action in the areas that need attention. Repeat this evaluation every six months to measure progress.

### CLARITY

First, the **mandate** of the group must be clear and prominent, with all efforts directed to advancing it. Second, the **purpose** of the meeting must be defined: What benefits (“return on investment”) will the meeting yield? Third, **the issues**: What questions must be answered and what decisions need to be made? Do the members always know precisely what they are debating or voting on? Finally, **the procedure**: Do the members understand basic rules of order and how they should be used to facilitate progress and collective decision making?

## **ORDER AND DECORUM**

One member only should speak at a time (after being recognized to speak, and not by being the first off the mark to raise his or her voice). Members speak without being interrupted (as long as they stay on track and observe time limits). They remain courteous, use appropriate language, keep their comments to the issues and avoid personalities.

## **PRODUCTIVITY**

The meeting moves forward at an appropriate pace, allowing the members to make timely progress along a pre-defined agenda. Time is allocated to issues in accordance with their significance and the projected benefit of their discussion (*Time is money*). Members leave the meeting with a sense of accomplishment and with renewed enthusiasm and commitment to the group's mandate.

## **FLEXIBILITY AND CREATIVE THINKING**

Formal meeting structures (agenda, time limits, rules of order) are used to facilitate progress and do not stifle or impede creative thinking. When circumstances require it, formal structures can be relaxed. The level of formality is customized to the needs of the group (fewer rules and less structure for smaller and more harmonious groups). Members are encouraged to be creative and to question conventional wisdom.

## **QUALITY DECISIONS**

The group's decisions are wise and responsible, and reflect due diligence. Members consider a broad spectrum of issues and take into account the impact of their decisions on internal and external parties. Prior to a meeting, members review all relevant documents. Solutions address real problems, not surface issues or "symptoms" and are bound to withstand long term scrutiny.

## **OPENNESS AND COLLABORATION**

Members come to meetings with an open mind, ready to listen to others before forming an opinion. There are no hidden agendas and



no pre-determined outcomes. Adversity (you against me) is replaced by collaboration (you and me against the problem). The tendency to instinctively dismiss and trivialize ideas is avoided, and the benefit of the doubt is given to everyone.

## **BALANCE**

Every member has the same opportunity to speak and influence the decision making process. Dominated discussions (90% of the time consumed by 10% of the people) are discouraged. “The tyranny of the minority” (outspoken members dictating the outcomes) is avoided, and true democracy (shared decision making) prevails.

## **SHARED RESPONSIBILITY**

Every member contributes to the success of the meeting, avoids finger-pointing, and does not automatically defer to the Chair or to experienced members. For example, members feel free to question whether an agenda item is related to the group’s mandate, to complain about dominated discussions or to share an unusual idea, even if an experienced member might oppose it.

## **VARIETY**

Meetings are varied, engaging, interesting and fun. Predictability and monotony, the greatest enemies of creative thinking, are avoided.

## **LOGISTICAL SUPPORT**

Everything is there exactly when and where you need it. The room setup is just right. The room temperature is comfortable. The ventilation and the lighting work. The room is quiet and distraction-free. The audio-visual aids function like clockwork. The refreshments and meals are tasty, healthy, sufficient, and are served unobtrusively and at the right time.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**T**he author of this guide, Eli Mina, M.Sc., P.R.P., is a professional meeting chairman and public speaker, who runs a unique consulting and training practice out of Vancouver, BC, Canada. Since 1984, Eli has led highly interactive seminars and workshops, and has served his clients by chairing controversial meetings, demystifying and humanizing rules of order, and facilitating resolution of divisive organizational disputes. Eli's clients come from non-profit corporations, municipal government, businesses, credit unions, regulatory bodies, labor unions and others.

Eli is the author of "*The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings*" (from which this guide is derived), published by the American Management Association (AMACOM Books).

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For a more complete coverage of the topics addressed in this guide, you may wish to order "*The Complete Handbook of Business Meetings*" (ISBN 0814405606), as follows:

In Canada, contact McGraw Hill at 1-800-565-5758.

In the U.S., contact AMACOM Books at 1-800-714-6395, or through its web site [www.amanet.org](http://www.amanet.org).