

Parliamentary Procedure

[Adapted from Richard Q. Totusek]

Rule number one in all deliberative assemblies: If you want something to happen, don't just sit there—**MOVE!**

A motion which enjoys no complications during its life goes through 6 phases:

- 1) The motion is **MADE** by someone who has the floor.
- 2) The motion is **SECONDED** by someone who wishes to see it acted upon. Note that a Second is *not an endorsement* of the motion.
- 3) The Chair **STATES THE QUESTION** so that all are clear as to what is before the assembly. The commonly heard “with-the consent-of-my-second” withdrawal or modification of a motion is totally invalid.
- 4) The assemble **DEBATES** the motion. Note that it is the *motion* which the members of the assembly are debating, *not each other*. The Chair must be the only one addressed during debate, and must see to it that all debate is on the question before the body; otherwise the door is open to chaos. This is probably the most critical stage for maintaining order in an assembly and the real test of a Chair's cool.
- 5) The Chair **PUTS THE QUESTION**, calling for both the ayes and the noes. The Chair (if a member of the assembly) may vote to *break* a tie or to *make* a tie (thus defeating a motion).
- 6) The Chair **ANNOUNCES THE RESULT**, and the motion is history.

The maker of a motion has one major privilege and one major restriction. He or she is entitled to speak first on the motion (or, if he or she has not previously spoken, to be recognized in preference to others seeking the floor. On the other hand, the maker of a motion may *not speak against* the motion (although he or she may *vote* against it). Neither this privilege nor this restriction apply to the seconder.

One of the greatest aids to efficiency in an assembly is seeking **UNANIMOUS CONSENT** of the assembly, especially in minor matters or on items such as a request of the maker of a motion to withdraw it or modify the same.

Things to Do to a Motion

(Other Than Voting on It)

Namely, the **SUBSIDIARY MOTIONS** (NB: These are listed in order of ascending rank):

- 1) When you want to do in a motion without actually having to vote on it, move that it be **POSTPONED INDEFINITELY**. Note that this is the *only* Subsidiary Motion which allows debate on the main issue. Once any other Subsidiary Motion is made, debate is confined only to the merits of that “immediately pending” question.
- 2) If you don't like something about the motion, move to **AMEND** it by striking something out of it, inserting something into it, doing both of these, or offering a complete substitute motion on the same subject. Remember, however, that turn about is fair play (at least once) and that your amendment can be amended. (It stops there, thank God!)
- 3) If you want the motion studied, move to **REFER** (or **COMMIT**) it to a standing or special committee, or wherever. Be certain to include in your motion *where* it should go, *when* it is to be brought back to the assembly, and/or any other instructions you feel are necessary.

- 4) If you want to delay the consideration of a motion to a specific time or until something has occurred, move to POSTPONE TO A CERTAIN TIME (or POSTPONE DEFINITELY). You can reinforce this by making it a SPECIAL ORDER at that time if you can muster a 2/3 vote for doing so.
- 5) If you want to hear more debate or less debate, you can move to LIMIT or EXTEND THE LIMITS OF DEBATE with 2/3 support; or
- 6) If you're sick and tired of debate, you can move the PREVIOUS QUESTION (either on the immediately pending question or on all pending questions), again with 2/3 backing.
- 7) Finally, if you want to delay action (and/or debate) to take up something pressing, you can move to LAY the motion ON THE TABLE. This is the most misunderstood and misused motion ever invented. It does *not* kill the motion (check out #1 above), nor can you “table something until . . .” (check out #4 above). It merely gives the motion a sedative until the assembly chooses to awaken it from its slumber with a motion to TAKE it FROM THE TABLE.

Those Reports

Reports have a strange way of causing confusion. Many reports are simply informative and require no action. Yet for some reason many assemblies cannot let well enough alone and feel compelled to make a motion at the conclusion of the report even though there is nothing to move (remember, *motions* are to *do* something). Motions to “receive” or “accept” an informational report are meaningless, albeit innocuous.

If the report contains recommendations, however, the motion to “accept” the report *means* accepting the recommendations in that report—which is fine if that is what the assembly wishes, but not so fine if the assembly is only trying to say, “Thank you for your work.”

If the report contains recommendations which the committee wishes to place on the floor, the reporting member may choose to do so by moving the committee's report. This is an interesting motion, because it *contains its own second* (assuming the committee has more than one member) and requires no second from the floor.

A special case occurs when a committee reports back on a motion or resolution which was referred to it. In *all* such cases, the main question before the assembly is the original motion (including amendments). This can give rise to the following situations:

- 1) The committee reports favorably on the resolution: The assembly acts upon the resolution. (Good ! No chance for confusion).
- 2) The committee reports unfavorably on the resolution: The assembly still acts upon the original resolution, which is the pending question, and *not on the committee's report*. (I.e., an “aye” vote supports the original resolution, not the committee's unfavorable recommendation.)
- 3) The committee reports favorably on the resolution with *amendment(s)* and the reporting member moves the amendment(s): Now the immediately pending question is on the amendment(s), after which the main motion (as amended or as not amended) comes back on the floor. The same principles apply if the committee moves any other Subsidiary Motion.

The key to handling reports is simply to think about what is actually being said or done. All too many assemblies (and their Chairs) lose track of what things *mean* when a report rears its threatening head. Just don't panic, and everything will be fine!