

## CHAIRING A MEETING

Why do meetings fail? Well, there may be reasons such as lack of time, a badly designed agenda or an unsatisfactory venue. However, if the chairperson is doing his (or her) job, it should be possible to overcome these difficulties.

Chairing a meeting means ensuring that a meeting achieves its aims. The meeting should have been called for a specific purpose and all discussion at the meeting must be steered to this end. This may sound simple in theory but in practice it is a very demanding task. The skills required include:

### **Impartiality**

A chairperson is like a judge in a court. He should ensure that all participants have an opportunity to express their point of view. It can be difficult to leave your own opinions at home, but if you can't remain impartial, you shouldn't have taken the job.

### **Assertiveness**

Ensuring that everyone gets a hearing will almost certainly involve stopping someone from dominating the proceedings. The more contentious the issue the more likely you are to require firmness. You don't need to be rude or dogmatic. Phrases such as "I think we should hear from Ms. Smith on this" or "can we have some comments from the engineering department on this" should be sufficient in most cases. Once you provide this opening, however, you need to ensure that there are no interruptions while the next speaker has their say.

### **Staying on course**

How often have you seen an agenda left totally aside? The meeting starts off well but becomes embroiled in a particular topic (perhaps the first item on the agenda) and ends when time runs out. A Chairperson must assess the importance of each item on the agenda, and allot time to each topic as required. If one issue begins to dominate, the chairperson must take control. You might suggest a further meeting to discuss the issue at a later date, or that the main parties concerned could continue the discussion at the end of the meeting. Sometimes it will be necessary to call for a decision and then move on to the next topic. You need to stay alert and make sure that the issue has been given an adequate and impartial hearing within the allotted time.

### **Summarizing**

Summarizing can be used to end a topic, to end a discussion, to limit the need for discussion and at the end of a meeting to ensure that everyone has a clear overview of what took place or what action is now required. It is an invaluable skill for a chairperson. Summarizing requires active listening. You have to state concisely what was said in an impartial way and end with a clear statement about what is expected to happen next. It takes practice to summarize well, but it is a skill well worth developing.

Many people feel that being a chairperson means opening the meeting and stopping rows. There is much more to it than that. Prior to the meeting, a chairperson should consult with the secretary regarding the agenda, ensure that all interested parties have been notified, assess the level of interest and the potential for divisiveness for each item, and allot time to each item, based on decisions required and number of people attending.

During the meeting, the chairperson must focus on the decisions required of the meeting, ensure that all participants are accorded adequate time, decide when to end debate on each topic, use appropriate questions to elucidate information or re-direct discussion, listen carefully to all contributions, and clearly summarize proceedings with an emphasis on decisions taken and future plans.

The above are all key ingredients for a fruitful meeting. A tactful but assertive chairperson will facilitate an effective meeting, and that's what everyone wants.