

What Rules do you Follow?

Board meetings are governed by rules, but rules must be adapted to the setting. A group of several hundred people working together needs different rules than a board of 10 people. Robert's Rules provide for an orderly, democratic process and are based on the principles of, 1) the majority has the right to decide, 2) the minority has a right to be heard, and 3) rights of absentees need to be protected.

A good meeting is one in which the members are free to address the issues and arrive at conclusions together. Strict enforcement of Robert's distracts from this kind of spontaneity. There must be order but for smaller, more informal settings the goal and more appropriate goal is to create an atmosphere where spontaneous but disciplined participation happens.

An option: instead of going through the usual call for motion, second, and question, when discussion has progressed sufficiently, say, "I am testing mutual consent." If there is no objection, the issue is considered to be resolved. If there is objection, discussion continues to the point of consent, or the chair calls for the vote, moving the discussion along while holding to democratic principles.

Three principles that honor Robert's principles:

- Was there an open, trusting atmosphere where members expressed themselves freely and respectfully?
- Were good decisions made?
- Do the decisions represent all who were present, and do they own them?

The Consensus Model for Running Your Meetings

There is no law mandating that non-profits must make decisions using Robert's Rules.

The consensus model could look something like this:

Someone presents an idea, formally or informally and the decision-making process looks something like this:

- The idea is passed around and the pros and cons are discussed.
- As a result of the discussion—the more input, the better—the idea is often modified.
- If a general agreement seems to be emerging (this is where good listening and facilitation skills are helpful), you can test for consensus by restating the latest version of the idea or proposal to see if everybody agrees.
- If anyone dissents, you return to the discussion to see if you can modify the idea further to make it acceptable to everyone.

Unlike parliamentary procedure, which results in an up-or-down, yes-or-no vote, the consensus process allows for a continuum of responses. Strong endorsement to strong disagreement. The consensus spectrum allows for subtle reactions and is a more intuitive way to make decisions.

In the traditional consensus model, one person has the power to block the decision if they strongly disagree. If the board is unable to create a compromise to satisfy the blocker, they may call for a majority vote as a last resort. This is sometimes known as "modified consensus," and for groups that want to try out consensus, it may be the best way to begin. It can be time consuming, but it creates a more informal and equitable environment where everyone's voice is valued.