Here’s something for the mayor and council to consider, would you pass on to all and see if anyone’s interested in talking about adopting this format? (excerpted from email below)

Thanks!

Julie

FEATURE

Conversational norms don’t apply

A committee chair whom I was working with recently asked me, “How can you restrain the people who talk too much and encourage the shy people?” I told her about the amazing results one gets when one follows the rule that no one can speak a second time until everyone who wishes to do so has spoken once. This is the most-neglected rule in Robert’s Rules, and has a transforming effect on meetings.

I couldn’t resist mentioning that I had given the same training to her predecessor a couple of years ago. But when I asked, “Has the committee been following that rule?” the answer was “No.”

It made me think. How does it happen that we offer this extremely useful set of tools for great meetings, and then folks don’t take them up and use them? It seems as if it’s just too difficult for people to break their normal pattern of conversation and accept the discipline of this structure.

David Mills, with whom I’ve studied the Alexander technique for many years, once said, “People want to be different, but they don’t want to change to get there.” I can’t stress enough how beneficial it is to follow the simple rules of Robert in board and committee discussion. But in order to do it, a group has to accept the fact that our ordinary norms of conversation don’t apply.

In ordinary conversation, people speak up when they feel like it. They interrupt each other. They may get on their high horse and dominate the conversation, or two people may get into an argument. Nobody objects, nobody says, “Hey, this isn’t fair.”

At board meetings, though, members have to be willing to protest when these things happen. They have to learn how to say “point of order” and not feel that they’re transgressing against civility. Otherwise, we’ll just continue the same tired patterns, and fail to reap the benefits that result from insisting that everyone must have an equal chance to speak and to be heard.

How about your meetings? Are they conducted like ordinary conversations, or do you use a structured approach?

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