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Managing the Meeting

Managing the meeting is the prime responsibility of the chairperson. In order to do this well, a number of factors should be taken into consideration.

| Time Management

Good time management is essential for a meeting to be effective. Meetings that drag on or go round in circles run the risk of losing the necessary quorum because people leave if they feel their time is being wasted. According to Allan Shaw, registrar at the University of Fort Hare,

Meetings always seem to run over time and chairpersons have to be ruthless in their control of time allocations, otherwise important issues get skimmed over or hasty and unwise decisions are made.

The chairperson of Technikon Pretoria Council believes that any council meeting that goes beyond two-and-a-half hours has lost touch with the key issues and could easily border on micromanagement instead of performing the governance role it is supposed to play. To streamline council meetings at Technikon Northern Gauteng, the executive committee (of council) meets just before the main council meeting in order to go through the whole agenda and the business of the meeting.

The chairperson of the Interim Council of the Durban Institute of Technology suggests that the following factors contribute to time being squandered in meetings:

The size of council and range of representation

The national policy of co-operative governance demands high levels of representivity on governance structures such as councils. On the other hand, the sheer size of councils can make them unwieldy, especially if all members feel they should participate in every discussion. Therefore councils should think very carefully about the issue of size when drawing up their own institutional statutes and determining the composition of council. For the same reason, they should also be cautious about exercising their right to co-opt additional members on to council. In addition, without curbing free and open discussion, the chairperson should exhort members to use their speaking rights only when they have something substantial to contribute and not for the mere expression of opinion.

Too many meetings

If too many meetings are held that are seen as unnecessary it becomes difficult to establish a quorum of members. Those who do attend under these circumstances may feel doubly robbed of their time, as all substantive decisions have to be delayed until the next quorate meeting.

Too many items on the agenda

If there are too many items on the agenda, and there is no realistic possibility of concluding business in the allocated time, many members excuse themselves from attending the meeting.

Hidden agendas

The Higher Education Act (1997) states that 'the members of a council must be persons with knowledge and experience relevant to the objects and governance of the public higher education institution concerned'. The Act and much of the literature on good governance

emphasise the importance of always acting in good faith while serving the best interests of the institution. People with narrow or sectarian interests do not make good members of council and may waste the time of others by pursuing agendas that are not in the broad interests of the institution.

Poor preparation by members

Some people who serve on councils have a multiplicity of other commitments and obligations, which may mean that they are not always fully prepared for meetings. Others do not prepare before the meeting because they receive voluminous documentation at short notice. Poor preparation on the part of members means time will inevitably be wasted in additional explanations and clarification.

As mentioned above, a successful meeting depends on a skilled chairperson. The more questions and answers that can be dealt with before the meeting commences, the better the flow of business through the meeting. A good chairperson should have the ability to listen carefully and intervene clearly and decisively where necessary.

| Procedures to be Followed at the Start of the Meeting

Lack of punctuality at the start of meetings is a constant irritant which must be handled with tact. There are two issues here. One is that members arriving late may delay the start of the meeting as a meeting cannot formally be convened without a quorum of members. The second issue is that the chairperson may be forced to cancel or postpone the meeting if it appears that a quorum will not be formed at all. A meeting will have no legal standing without a quorum, so although discussion may take place among those who are present, no decisions can be taken. The code of conduct should specify how much time should lapse before the chairperson calls the meeting off if no quorum is formed. If lack of punctuality is a recurring problem, an examination of the causes and of the level of commitment of members is warranted.

Before starting the business of the meeting there should be agreement or consensus as to how the meeting should be handled

and what procedures have to be followed to ensure that the meeting is conducted in an acceptable manner that is respectful to all the members and meets the specified purpose and objectives. Ensuring how members will work well together can be embodied either in ground rules or in a code of conduct. These rules should be written and should supplement the written rules of the institutional (or Standard) statute. The actions that will be taken against those who do not comply should be clearly spelt out. The institutional statute also indicates the action to be taken in the case of members who are repeatedly absent without the consent of council.

At the beginning of the meeting the outcomes that have to be achieved should be defined clearly to avoid a lengthy meeting and unfocused discussions. When the members have convened, the secretary circulates the attendance register to determine whether a quorum is formed and, if it is, she/he notifies the chairperson. When a quorum has been established, the chairperson thanks the secretary and formally opens the meeting. Once the meeting has officially been opened the recording of the proceedings begins. After the welcoming remarks and opening, the secretary should notify the chairperson of any apologies made and bring to the attention of the chairperson announcements that have to be made pertaining to any of the members.

Once all the opening formalities and announcements have been completed, the next step is to review the minutes of the previous meeting to establish whether they correctly reflect the proceedings and that there are no typographical or spelling mistakes. A malpractice here would be for a chairperson to assume the minutes can be taken as read and to fail to go through the minutes during the meeting. If the minutes are an accurate record of the previous meeting, even members who were not present at the previous meeting should be able to understand what happened and should participate in the review of the minutes.

A member who was present at the previous meeting moves a motion for the adoption of the minutes once corrections have been noted. The chairperson asks for a member to second the motion after which the minutes are adopted. It is important to note at this stage that the use of the word 'confirm' does not mean that the minutes have been approved or adopted. The words to use are either 'adoption' or 'approval' of the minutes. The minutes are then signed by the chairperson. The next step is to deal with matters that arise from the

minutes of the previous meeting. As far as possible, such matters should be dealt with amicably and decisions taken, so that the same matters do not arise on a recurring basis in following meetings. In the agenda of the meeting there will be those matters that are standing items, of which the council will not want to lose sight. These could be matters that relate to issues of the performance, strategy and survival of the institution. These are the building blocks that have to be monitored constantly by council.

| General Meeting Procedures

The chairperson is responsible for maintaining order during the meeting and ensuring that all discussions are focused on serving the purpose and achieving the objectives of the meeting. Every member who wishes to make a contribution to the meeting has to do so through the chairperson who has the responsibility of regulating discussion and establishing the sequence of speakers. No private discussions should be tolerated. Neither should extended arguments and debates be allowed if the meeting is to arrive at decisions or resolutions in relation to the matter under discussion. It is critical for the chairperson to be impartial during discussions and to refrain from speaking for or against controversial matters. The discussion stage requires the chairperson to exercise the skills of active listening and facilitation of the discussion.

Motions and voting procedures

Where a matter requires the adoption of a resolution, a motion may be proposed by a member of council and will be accepted by the chairperson if seconded by another member. The chairperson may also require that the motion be in writing. Any counter-proposals or amendments to the original motion also have to be seconded. Other members of council may not speak more than once to the motion (without the consent of the meeting) and the mover has the right of reply. After these deliberations the chairperson then puts the matter to the vote (unless there is clear consensus). There should be absolute clarity about who has voting rights on council and who does not. In circumstances where more than one proposal has been made, the order in which motions are put to the meeting for voting

is the following: first, the counter-proposal (or motion) is voted upon, and if this secures a majority of votes, all other motions fall away. If this is not accepted by the meeting, the chairperson puts any amendment to the original proposal to the vote. If the amendment is not supported by the meeting, the chairperson puts the original motion to the vote. Once a motion has been accepted by a majority of members of council, it becomes a resolution of the council that is binding on all members and should be recorded in a book of resolutions for ease of reference.

Voting by proxy (on behalf of an absent member) should be discouraged, and many institutions do not permit this practice in the provisions of their institutional statutes. Most issues require a simple majority of votes, but the institutional statute may specify some issues that require more than this. For example, the Standard Institutional Statute (2002) states that changes to a statute or rule require the support of 75% of members present at the meeting.

The chairperson has the power to make an emergency adjournment as a result of unruly behaviour or if the dignity of members is being violated. A speaker can be interrupted by the chairperson if she/he:

- speaks beyond the terms of the matter under discussion;
- uses words not conducive to good order and conduct;
- makes statements of a defamatory nature;
- breaches the law of the land; and
- does not raise points through the chairperson.

If such behaviour persists, the chairperson has the right to ask the offender to leave the meeting.

There are a number of other formal motions that may be put forward in the course of a meeting that do not necessarily result in a resolution of the council but are used to shape or clarify debate. These are:

A point of order

A point of order is not only called by the chairperson. Other members can put this motion to the meeting if the speaker on the floor uses undignified, abusive, blasphemous or unacceptable language.

A point of information

This is raised when clarity is sought on what is being presented. The chairperson must ensure, however, that the point is raised in good faith and will not unnecessarily derail the meeting.

Closure

The motion for closure is sometimes referred to as ‘the gag’. This is a motion to ask for closure on a discussion which seems to go around in circles and is unfruitful. The chairperson has the discretionary power to either allow the motion or let the discussion continue. The chairperson should not abuse his/her power and must always act in the best interests of the meeting and the institution.

The previous question

This motion is usually moved in the form: ‘That the question be not now put’.

The use of this motion is to pre-empt a decision from being taken on a matter. This motion is used when controversial matters that result in heated debates are under discussion. The matter could be postponed for discussion at a subsequent meeting when feelings have cooled off.

To proceed to the next business

This is similar to the closure motion as the intent is to steer the meeting towards expeditious discussion of the meeting’s business.

To adjourn the debate

A motion to adjourn a debate is put when the meeting feels there is insufficient information or evidence to make an informed decision. This happens when members feel the matter will not be dealt with satisfactorily if a decision is made at that time.

To adjourn the meeting

This is a motion for the temporary stoppage of the meeting. A meeting is adjourned when the business for which it has been convened has not been completed. An adjourned meeting is continued at a later stage and, when reconvened, the meeting will deal only with the remaining matters on the agenda. Reasons for adjournment could be the time factor, or disruption resulting from a disorderly meeting. The chairperson cannot unilaterally decide to adjourn a meeting but is required to get consensus on the matter.

In all the above motions the chairperson has the final say as to whether to grant the motion or not. This discretionary power should not be used to support the chairperson's individual preference but should always be used in the best interests of the meeting.

The secretary becomes an important ally to the chairperson in these instances, especially in matters relating to complying with the law. It is crucial that the point-of-order rule not be abused as too many such interruptions will inevitably lead to a non-productive meeting. The chairperson should guard against the same people monopolising discussions and all members should be given a fair chance to make their contributions.

Delegated authority

Councils have the right to delegate some of their functions to committees or subcommittees and to the executive managers of the institution. (There are some functions that it may not delegate, however.) It should be noted that delegation of authority does not absolve council of responsibility and accountability. Committees acting on behalf of council should have clearly specified terms of reference. A crucial matter to note is that committees do not have decision-making powers, but can simply make recommendations to the full council for decisions to be taken. Council should be assured that matters sent to committees and returned to council in the form of recommendations have been handled with diligence and skill. If recommendations presented by a committee are ambiguous, a motion should be moved to refer the matter back to the committee.

While the meeting is proceeding, both the chairperson and the secretary need to be alert. While the chairperson has the task of maintaining order, the secretary should be recording the

proceedings of the meeting. The secretary is therefore regarded as the 'pen' of the meeting. Electronic recording equipment may be used during the meeting as this will act as a back-up for the secretary and could also be used as evidence if conflict arises regarding the record or interpretation of proceedings at the meeting. It should be borne in mind, however, that electronic recording of the meeting can inhibit open discussion and debate.

Minutes

Minutes differ from a report because they do not record what was said during debate but focus on the decisions that have been taken. In other words, minutes are not a verbatim account of the meeting, and the arguments that preceded the passing of a resolution are not recorded. It is permissible, however, for the objection of a particular member to be recorded, if that member so requests.

In writing the minutes, the following should be taken as guidelines:

- The minutes should be transcribed immediately after the meeting while the facts are still fresh.
- A person who was absent from the meeting should be able to understand the minutes with ease.
- The sequence of the minutes should follow the structure of the meeting, which will have been determined largely by the agenda.
- Minutes are normally written in the past tense.
- Decisions should be recorded in a clear and unambiguous manner.
- A decision should be followed by a list of actions to be carried out, the party responsible for taking the actions, and the time-frame within which they should be completed. This will assist in following up on matters before and during the next meeting.

The minutes are normally recorded under the following headings:

- Name of institution
- Type of meeting
- Location, date and time of meeting

- Name of chairperson
- Members present
- Apologies
- Minutes of previous meeting
- Matters arising
- Reports
- New matters
- General business
- Date of next meeting
- Closure

Closure

Once all the agenda items have been handled satisfactorily, the chairperson attends to the matters that have been included under 'General' in the agenda. When all matters have been dealt with, the chairperson thanks the members for their attendance and participation and declares the meeting officially closed.

Since council meetings are held relatively infrequently, and there is little time for council members to socialise, it is a good idea to combine the meeting with an informal lunch or dinner to give members time to interact at a personal level.