

## More Effective Meetings Using Martha's Rules of Order

An alternative to Robert's Rules of Order and a way to run more efficient board meetings and improve other meetings, too.



Robert's Rules of Order were first published in 1876 as a method of conducting orderly meetings. They are loosely modeled after parliamentary procedure. They have been updated many times and are still a popular way of running meetings – especially board meetings.

But there is a simpler alternative you can consider – Martha's Rules of Order. Martha's Rules can help you run more efficient meetings – meetings that take up less time.

Martha's Rules of Order were originally created in the 1970s as a strategy to run more harmonious meetings for low-income housing coops.

### Key elements of Martha's Rules for running board meetings

**Agenda:** Meetings are planned around an agenda that is created by the chairperson and shared in advance with the attendees.

The agenda should include specific items and time limits for each. The chairperson keeps the meeting on time.

*Having clear end times in the agenda enables the meeting to end on time.*

**Proposals:** Proposals for each topic on the agenda are prepared by the individual or committee that is sponsoring the proposal. It's shared in advance of the meeting, allowing enough time for participants to absorb the content before the meeting. Ideally, the information provided would include a specific proposal that includes a summary, the full text of the proposal, background information, relevant data, pros and cons, and possible alternatives – as well as a specific recommendation.

*This saves time because long presentations and reading documents during the meeting are not needed. A good proposal answers most common questions people are likely to have in advance.*

**Member/participant responsibility:** Board members are responsible to come to the meeting fully prepared, having read all the proposals before the meeting.

**Proposal sponsor:** Once a person (or committee) has sponsored a proposal, they are responsible for it. The group may not discuss or vote on the issue unless the sponsor is present. The sponsor is also responsible for concisely (within short preset time limit in the agenda) presenting the item to the group.

**Straw Poll or Sense Vote:** After the sponsor presents the proposal, a pre-vote is cast for the proposal, prior to ANY discussion. This vote is called a "sense vote," or "straw poll," wherein the group can get an idea of how everyone feels about the issue.

The process is very simple. The chair asks the following questions and the participants vote using thumbs up, thumbs sideways or thumbs down.

- “Who likes (or supports) the proposal?” (represented as a thumbs up)
- “Who can live with the proposal?” (represented as a sideways thumb) – Those who vote this way are agreeing to support the proposal, even if not 100% thrilled with every aspect of it.
- “Who is uncomfortable with the proposal?” (represented as a thumbs down)



This process saves a lot of opinion sharing and discussion, especially if most people are already in agreement.

### **Results of straw poll/sense vote:**

- If all of the group likes/supports or can live with the proposal, it is immediately moved to the next stage, a formal vote, with no discussion necessary.
- If most of the group is uncomfortable with the proposal, it is postponed for further rework by the sponsor. (Those making the proposal can seek feedback outside the meeting setting.)
- If some members are uncomfortable, they can state their objections and the clock for a brief (10 minute) discussion begins. At the conclusion of the timer, the meeting facilitator calls for a vote on the following question: “Should we implement this decision over the stated objections of the minority, when a majority of the group feels it is workable?” A “yes” vote would lead to a majority rule, and a no vote would postpone the decision for future rework by the sponsor.

### **Other ways to use the polling strategy that’s part of Martha’s Rules**

While Martha’s Rules work well to create shorter more effective board meetings, the thumbs up, across, or down polling technique can help with staff and volunteer meetings where a decision needs to be made or when management or leadership needs input on a decision they want to make without spending a lot of time in discussion and opinion sharing.

Diane Blankenburg on our team uses this polling strategy to facilitate team consensus decision-making in meetings that are not as formal as board meetings: She explains it this way:

- “Who supports this proposal 100%?” (represented as a thumbs up)
- “Who can live with and will support this proposal even if it’s not their first choice?” (represented as a sideways thumb)
- “Who is uncomfortable with the proposal and is willing to discuss questions or concerns?” (represented as a thumbs down)

The meeting chairperson can designate a set amount of time for discussion on the topic and then call for a second poll. This can prevent long circular discussions and ensure that you know how everyone in the room feels, not just the opinions of those with the loudest voices.

Perhaps you can give Martha’s Rules polling a try in your next meeting.