



What's a Snippet? Glad you asked! A Snippet is short article about meetings or parliamentary procedure. New snippets are released on the first day of every month at www.agreatmeeting.com.



Snippet #156 Impartiality

What does it mean to be impartial? Although it's easy to talk the talk, how do we walk the walk?

Impartiality means that the chair does not express an opinion or attempt to sway the result. There is an equal opportunity for all to make their points and bring forward ideas for consideration. The members must be able to respectfully disagree with one another and feel comfortable exploring contrary positions to arrive at the best course of action for the organization. In fact, the most important job of a great chair is to create an atmosphere that is safe for all points of view. Often people remark that conversations held in the hallways and the parking lot are the conversations that should have been held in the room during the meeting.

A chair cannot function as both a chair and a member; being a chair is a full time job. Picture a four-way intersection, with cars stopped in all directions. There's a police officer directing traffic, trying to keep it moving in an orderly manner. Now picture the officer stopping all of the traffic, getting in the patrol car, and driving through the intersection while the others wait. The right to debate is controlled by the chair and when the chair usurps that there's an unfair advantage.

Likewise, the chair takes unnecessary risks by answering questions, especially when the question is about work or an issue that others actually handled. The chair might accidentally give incorrect information. Those who know the correct answer are left with a choice of whether to contradict the chair or stay silent. Both have unnecessary consequences. Having all the answers is not in the chair's job description, and people don't think less when the chair shares the spotlight and the credit.

A chair has all of the rights of membership (unless limited by the bylaws) but must exercise them very carefully in favor of the assembly's right to make the decision without undue influence. For example, unless the vote is by ballot the chair does not vote at the same time as the members, because divulging the chair's vote while voting could affect the result. If the chair's vote will not affect the result, the chair refrains from voting so as not to take sides. Sometimes this is referred to as "making or breaking a tie." But there's a bit more to it than that. How does this work?

- On a regular vote, the chair takes the vote. If one vote could make a difference, the chair can vote and reverse the result, or stay silent and leave things as they stand.
- When the vote is by roll call, the chair is called last, and only if needed.
- The chair must also be aware that, in some states, there is a legal requirement for a majority of the directors present. In such cases, the chair's abstention is counted as a vote in the negative, and also affects the result.

The chair also shows impartiality by refraining from debate. Whatever a chair says will carry more weight – and the equality of the board or members is lost. If one person is going to dictate an outcome (consciously or unconsciously) the value and effectiveness of the group deliberation is destroyed. Even with good intentions, it is impossible for a chair to speak on an equal basis with the members. Once the chair expresses a preference, less assertive members either do not feel comfortable expressing a contrary position or feel pressured to be a team player and go along, rather than do what is best for the association. A chair who chooses to debate must turn the meeting over to someone else who will remain impartial, usually a vice chair or an elected chair pro tem. The chair may not take back the gavel (literally or figuratively) until that matter is resolved. If the vote is postponed, the chair pro tem takes back the gavel at the time the matter is revisited. This passing of control upsets the rhythm and flow of the meeting, and should not be done lightly. The chair who debates is publicly declaring that his personal opinion is more important than the job to which he was elected.