



*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](http://www.agreatmeeting.com).



## Snippet #111 Testing the "Small Board Rule"

*Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised\** (RONR) says that procedures in small boards do not need the same formality as in larger boards, further defining the magic number as "about a dozen." Rules provide checks and balances and are best tested by looking at the extremes – the best case/worst case scenario. Does the rule work no matter who is "right?" If it does, it's probably a good rule.

There are seven points that, according to RONR, would "hinder business."

- Members may raise a hand instead of rising to obtain the floor. (We'll give them this one.)
- Motions need not be seconded
- Informal discussion without a motion is permitted
- If a proposal is "perfectly clear" a vote can be taken without a motion being introduced
- There is no limit on the number of times each director may debate
- The chair does not need to stand while taking a vote. (We'll give them this one, too.)
- The chair can engage in debate without leaving the chair.

Five of these points give cause for serious concern. In hundreds of training classes through the country, the most common complaints from directors and members are that the discussion rambles off topic, certain people dominate the discussion, and that the chair exercises undue influence over the rest of the board. All of these issues can be solved – or created – by the rules used in debate.

Let's start with whether or not motions should require seconds. If there is no requirement for a second, one director has the power to force the entire board to take up a motion that *not one other director wants to consider*. The motion will go into the minutes, and the board will be forced to go on record on something that, had a second been required, would not have been considered. Best case – it only takes a second. Worst case – the board will actually waste time it is trying to save.

In the next two examples, the board is allowed to let discussion wander with no clear topic – unless we can come up with a definition of "perfectly clear." This test is not only failed in the board room but in thousands of homes every weekend as parents communicate with their teenage children about their weekend plans. The motion as stated by the chair is what goes in the minutes, but who decides what the board just decided? The enemy of a great meeting is confusion, and the chair's primary task is to ensure that every member is clear about what is on the floor and what is being voted on.

The last two points are about fairness. Some people are naturally more assertive than others and if they feel strongly about an issue they will naturally want to rebut points made by others. This can transform group deliberation, where everyone contributes equally, into debaters and spectators. Those who are less assertive will back away, not wanting to fight their way onto the floor. If the chair is one of those who is debating, the entire appearance of fairness is lost. First, how do you counter someone who controls the floor and gets to speak at any time? Second, those who tend to be followers will naturally "go along" with the chair's wishes. When those two things start to happen, the entire deliberative process breaks down. It's no longer a board decision; it's the chair's will being done. Chairs who refrain from speaking show respect for the board's right to make the decision as a group, rather than asking board members to take sides.

Actions speak louder than words. A chair can easily maintain a less formal atmosphere while avoiding risky behavior by using two tools that already exist and don't sacrifice fairness: general consent and the consent agenda. Robert's "small board" rules don't pass the fairness test.

\*Robert, Henry M. et al., *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 11<sup>th</sup> edition, 2011, DaCapo Press, pages 487-88