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Who Was Robert, And Why Do We Still Follow His Rules, Anyway?

Alice Collier Cochran

Barowsky School of Business, Dominican University of California, alice.cochran@dominican.edu

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**WHO WAS ROBERT, AND WHY DO WE STILL FOLLOW HIS RULES,
ANYWAY?**

**Is an ancient method of running meetings popularized soon after the Civil
War still viable for many boards in nonprofits today?**

By Alice Collier Cochran, M.Ed.

Judy Long was excited about her decision to serve on the board of her neighborhood Association. She had been to consider joining this group of twelve members. Each person had a prescribed role and they wanted her to be in charge of designing and launching a web site, her specialty.

Her company, Langhorn Communications had a good reputation in the field of technology. Several years ago she had joined a Total Quality Management (TQM) team that included representatives from several related departments. They were told they had to use consensus decision making. Unfortunately they were struggling when they tackled controversial or complex issues. Sometimes one or a few people could keep the group from moving forward. They had wasted a lot of time.

After being elected to the Association board, Judy was surprised to find that the meetings were very formal. The chairperson had a thick book that was the method used to conduct the meeting, called *Robert's Rules of Order*. All decisions we made by simple majority rule. She knew consensus wasn't always the best way, but who was Robert, and why did they follow his rules, anyway?

Doing research of the web, she learned that Henry Martyn Robert had been an Army officer and engineer during the Civil War era. Due to his good reputation as a leader, he had been asked to run a meeting of men at a church in New England. Unfortunately it went badly and Robert was embarrassed. He vowed to find a method for running meetings of civic and religious groups that would result in *order* through a prescribed structure.

His search led him back to the Middle Ages and the origins of English parliamentary procedure. More modern versions by Thomas Jefferson and Luther Cushing influenced him. After experimenting with and modifying meeting rules, he published what we now know as *Robert's Rules of Order*. His intention nearly 130 years ago was a 16-page pamphlet. The 2000 Revised Version of the book now has 643 pages! When Judy read Chapter One she discovered that these rules were recommend for "deliberative assemblies" or larger groups of over a dozen members.

CONCORDANCE AS AN ALTERNATIVE

Judy knew that consensus could be considered “minority rule” and yet a simple majority allowed 50% plus one person to make a decision for the group. With a low quorum, a very few people could make decisions for the rest. Recently she found a new book called *Roberta's Rules of Order* that recommends a middle ground between consensus and simple majority rule.

Instead of procedural formality, debate and simple majority rule, this method advocates informality, dialogue and decision-making options including a supermajority called “concordance”. Concordance achieving a percentage of approval that represents a substantial majority of the board or team members – *determined by the group*. It encourages the group to work toward consensus, using the principles of conversational dialogue rather than debate, with a time limit. For instance group may decide to strive for consensus for a meeting or two, and if the decision hasn't been reached, use an 80% substantial agreement level to reach concordance.

PROBLEMS BEFORE SOLUTIONS (MOTIONS)

One of the other difficulties Judy noticed in the Association's meeting was the way the chairperson, using Robert's Rules of Order, required that there be a motion on the table before discussing the issue. Once the motion – a solution – was stated, everyone started debating for or against it. Rather than listening to

points of view, everyone seemed to be preparing to state opinion. There wasn't any creative thinking about other solutions. When I wanted to suggest a different solution it got procedurally complicated and ultimately required another motion.

In *Roberta's Rules of Order* the recommended approach, is to state and understand the problem first, look for causes and explore options before settling on a solution. Judy was familiar with this from the TQM methods. Stating the problem with background about it in the form of a verbal or written proposal allows all members to consider the full situation. The group's conversation then moves through three stages of Opening, to Narrowing, to Closing. At the end of the closing stage, a motion is made. This tested and logical flow comes from the training and consulting firm Interaction Associates and the nonprofit Interaction Institute for Social Change.

Judy was excited to learn about the alternatives. Talking with a veteran board member revealed that they too would welcome a different approach. Wanting to try this for herself first, she decided to form a technology team of other neighbors to work with her in developing the web site, using *Roberta's Rules of Order*. They would customize "Roberta's Special Rules for Meetings" (Resource A), evaluate that experience and then share what works best with others on the board and her quality team at work. Now she was looking forward to the meetings, and to making a contribution to the board.

Resources

Interaction Associates www.InteractionAssociates.com and

Interaction Institute for Social Change www.InteractionInstitute.org

Roberta's Rules of Order by Alice Collier Cochran, published by Jossey-Bass/Wiley, February 2004.

This story is an illustration with fictitious names; the book *Roberta's Rules of Order* is real.