

Board Insights



helping leaders govern organizations effectively

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Wording Motions in Advance

It happens over and over. After a formal meeting, attendees have different recollections of what was decided at the meeting. Two or three people may proceed to implement the decision the way they thought of it, and later discover that they didn't all have the same interpretation. When the secretary prepares the minutes several days later, she may have trouble deciphering her hand-written notes or realize that the typed version of the motion doesn't make sense.

When someone composes a motion during a meeting, they are usually speaking out loud as they are thinking about the decision they are proposing. Part way through the motion they may realize they didn't speak accurately so they change their wording along the way. Most meeting participants 'know' that they understand the mover's intent and in an effort to be time-efficient the meeting chair asks for a seconder and then discussion without asking the meeting secretary to restate the motion. When time isn't taken for precise motion clarity, there can be several different perceptions of what is really being discussed and nobody knows exactly what will show up in the official minutes. Yet, once the minutes of a formal meeting, such as a board meeting, are approved at a subsequent meeting, they are considered a legal document that binds the organization until a different decision on the same topic is formally made and recorded.

There is a way to avoid both the confusion around the specific intent and wording of a motion and the arduous task of wordsmithing by meeting attendees. Some organizations have the practice of drafting motions in advance of the meeting. When the meeting chair drafts the agenda, he considers what topics the group needs to address and the purpose for putting them on the agenda. Does the group need to hear background information, discuss the matter to prepare for a future decision, or make a decision at this meeting? Indicating why the topic is on the agenda helps meeting attendees prepare appropriately.

If the purpose of the agenda item is to make a decision at this meeting, then the meeting chair, or a member of the group who is working on this topic, knows the nature of the decision to be considered. The meeting chair can ask an informed person to clearly draft a possible decision with appropriate detail. This motion can be included on the agenda that is circulated a week or so before the meeting. Then, those who will be voting at the meeting can prepare by reviewing background information, getting their questions answered, preparing for relevant discussion, and considering if they would prefer a different decision. They can come to the meeting with

proposed amendments, if any, already written out, ideally bringing two copies of the amendment double-spaced, on a sheet of paper dedicated to this motion. If during the discussion it is apparent that different details should be included in the amendment, there is room for the mover of the amendment to edit their wording legibly.

When the meeting gets to an agenda item that requires a decision, the chair can ask for a mover and seconder of the printed motion. Everyone will be clear on what is about to be discussed. If amendments are proposed, the mover of the amendment can pass one copy of his proposed wording to the secretary so she can record accurate wording. It is also helpful if amended motions are displayed during discussion so everyone in the room is clear on the specifics of the decision being considered.

Meeting preparation is a key to effective and efficient group decision making. What meetings do you participate in that could be improved if motions were drafted and shared ahead of time?