A brief guide to effective[1] chairing

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This guide focuses on chairing business meetings, rather than academic conferences.

1. Have a well-defined agenda.

a. Divide items into five sections: (a) opening matters, (b) items for information, (c) items for discussion, (d) items for decision, and (e) closing matters. This signals to the attendees where discussion/questions are not expected/planned for, and where discussion *must* result in an outcome. Sometimes it isn't possible/appropriate to group all items of a single type together at the same point in the agenda, so if you need more than one "block" of (b)-(d) that's fine.

b. Identify an owner for each agenda item: An effective chair is one who is not leading on every single issue, but instead is organizing and moderating the discussion. If people raise items for the agenda, ask them which of type (b)-(d) it is, and who will be speaking to the item (usually the person who raises the agenda). If someone has an agenda item that they want raised but they don't want to talk to it themselves nor can they find someone else who does, it might not be that important.

c. Put in time stamps: When it comes to (c)-type items, it's very easy for people to talk and talk because there is no clear "end" to the conversation (e.g., as there is in (d)-type items where a vote is called). Budget a particular amount of time for the item, put that amount on the agenda, and tell people when you open the agenda item that "we have (e.g.) ten minutes to discuss this item". When the ten minutes are up, move on. (Or when you are close to the ten minutes, use the "we'll take two more comments and then move on" warning.[2])

2. Have a plan for how to handle questions

a. Decide whether to take questions in order or to prioritize people who haven't spoken. When chairing a zoom meeting, the "participants" list will order the people who have their hands raised in the order that they raised them. In an in-person meeting, you might wish to ask people to raise their hands and keep them raised until you have noted them all down. Both options – taking questions in order *and* prioritizing people who haven't spoken – are fine, and can be mixed together as you feel appropriate. *You are the chair*: You get to determine who speaks when.

b. When necessary, use the hand/finger distinction: A hand is a new topic/issue. A finger is a comment/clarification/quick response to a previous hand. (This works better in person, but you can sometimes see on zoom how/when people raise their hands and intuit "oh, I bet that person has a finger on the previous comment, I'll bring them in.") Feel free to ask: Is this a new topic or a quick response to the previous? And if someone says "new" when you thought they'd say "response," then ask them to wait.

c. Signal your order: People may not know where in the queue you are, so when you call on someone, say who the next 2-3 people in the queue are, so that they can prepare.

d. Remember you are the chair: If someone is speaking overlong, not to the point, or repeating what has already been said, it is not rude to interrupt them.

3. End the meeting when the meeting ends

a. This signals to members that you are aware of demands on their time and that you are organizing your meetings effectively, and makes them more likely to want to come to the next meeting you chair.

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1 Based on my experience chairing committee and general meetings of Durham UCU, and chairing sessions at academic conferences, mostly populated by philosophers (who are famously argumentative) and mathematicians.

2 In some sense, chairing a meeting effectively is like wrangling a 5yo. You have to take their preferences and actions in account, but in the end, you are the one in charge. You can help support them through transitions by proper signposting, but when the time comes, *you*, not them, get to decide that it is time to leave the playground and go home.