ELI MINA'S ARTICLES, INSIGHTS & IDEAS

Eli Mina, M.Sc., PRP, is a Vancouver, Canada based board effectiveness consultant and Registered Parliamentarian. In business since 1984, Eli advises his clients on board effectiveness, chairing contentious meetings, preventing and dealing with disputes and boardroom problems, and demystifying the rules of order. Eli's clients come from municipal government, school boards, indigenous communities, regulatory bodies, credit unions, colleges and universities, and the non-profit sector.

Eli is the author of "*101 Boardroom Problems and How to Solve Them*", *"Mina's Guide to Minute Taking"* and several other books and publications on meetings and shared decision-making. Eli's website is www.elimina.com.

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MAKING MEETINGS WORK

Was it a monologue, or a business meeting?

While I was waiting for a friend at a coffee shop, I could not help but observe an interesting conversation among six people at the next table. One of them totally controlled the conversation. She was animated and entertaining and delivered a never-ending series of stories and commentaries. I was a bit puzzled by how she managed to breathe.

The other people responded by nodding and smiling. Some would find an excuse to disengage and respond to text messages or emails. Occasionally, one of them would manage to squeeze in a word or two, only to be quickly interrupted with another lengthy response.

Out of curiosity, I timed the conversation, and the talkative individual consumed 27 out of 30 minutes. It was quite a spectacle and was fun to watch. I was almost disappointed when my friend finally arrived at the coffee shop.

Why am telling you this story? Similar dynamics occur on numerous boards and councils with significant mandates and substantial assets to oversee. Outspoken or assertive individuals dominate the debate, while others sit back and watch. Would anyone dare to speak up in favour of equal engagement of participants, regardless of whether they are new or long-standing members? In many groups, complaining about domination is just not done. It is not within the group's culture and is likely to be viewed as rude and offensive.

Having monologues in an informal setting, such as a coffee shop or a dinner table, may not have real consequences. In fact, in such settings, many people rely on others to lead the conversation and prevent dreaded dead air.

However, in a business meeting, this casualness can compromise the decision-making process. Risk levels may rise due to the lack of engagement of less assertive, yet astute, members. These dynamics can breed flawed decisions that may come back to haunt a governing body later on.

I am often asked about how to work with members who dominate meetings. My departure point is that no one embraces counterproductive habits because they are a bad person. More likely, the problem is a weak decision-making system.

How can you address such situations and reinforce the decision-making system? Simple statements by the chair or a member can make an enormous difference, such as: *Excuse me, can we hear from those who have not spoken on this issue? How about Rebecca, she has had experience with issues like the one we're discussing.*

Racing has undesirable side effects

Hindsight is 20-20. This becomes apparent when considering how I handled an annual general meeting with a crammed agenda. There were 30, yes, 30, resolutions to debate and vote on in just one hour. Facing this reality, all I could think of was the math: 60 minutes divided by 30 means an average of *two minutes per resolution*. We used a stop watch and timed each resolution, giving a precise indication of how much time was left: one minute left, 30 seconds, time's up. We concluded the meeting in 57 minutes, and everyone marveled at this amazing achievement. We won the race against the clock!

But did we really win? True, all resolutions were voted on, but was there genuinely informed voting? Was there a real opportunity to give the resolutions the due diligence that would have led to confident votes? Did the rush inadvertently create an unsafe environment, where people with useful input were stifled by the strict time limits? Might this race against the clock have led to undesirable side effects, such as flawed decisions?

You may ask, what else could have been done to make the process measured, meaningful and genuinely democratic?

To start, we could have prioritized the resolutions and placed the ones that had the greatest impact on the organization's mission first, so we would not risk losing them in the queue. We might have consolidated resolutions dealing with the same topic. We could have contacted proponents of redundant resolutions and suggested they withdraw them in light of the busy agenda. We might have grouped non-contentious resolutions on a *consent agenda*, to be voted on together, leaving time for others to be fully debated. Lastly, the meeting's planners could have set a more realistic and comfortable time frame for the meeting.

Ultimately, the goal of group decision making is to achieve quality decisions in an inclusive manner and at a comfortable and reasonable pace. Racing against the clock to the finish line makes it impossible to achieve this goal, and it is bound to set things up for failure. Your organization deserves better, so don't settle for less than the optimal conditions for meaningful and informed decision making.

A loud voice is not a pre-requisite

Some of my most interesting assignments involve chairing contentious meetings. As an external chair, I bring impartiality and calmness to such situations.

Given my soft voice and low-key style, I am sometimes greeted with skepticism: *Are you sure you can tackle strong and disruptive people who know how to bully everyone else? How can you possibly do this work when you're so quiet and soft spoken?* One person even said this to me: *We are going to have a really troublesome group at this meeting. We're not sure we should have you chair it. We may need to bring some enforcers from the local night club.*

The above statements imply that in order to deal effectively with disruptions, a *strong* chair is needed. In this case, *strong* may mean loud and aggressive, or someone who can *overpower the bullies*. My response to such comments is this: I have chaired tough meetings for many years. As a matter of practice, I do not shout, nor do I apply any bullying or intimidation tactics. If I were to try overpowering people with my voice, I would lose every time. I subscribe to the phrase: *strong and harsh words may indicate a weak cause.*

So, if a loud voice and an aggressive manner are not needed, how can you manage tough meetings and disruptive people? I propose that you establish respect for individuals and respect for key principles. These two steps will place you on a solid platform, add volume to your low voice, and add soft power to your gentle manner.

Here are two specific areas to focus on:

First, when you interact with people who seem angry and aggressive, avoid engaging in *yes, but* arguments with them. Instead, ask questions that show genuine respect and curiosity, like: *Can you explain why this is so important to you?* or: *How do you see this fitting with the issues at hand?* Your questions must imply no judgment of the person or their motivation. Instead, you must be guided by the assumption that the person is perfectly capable of reasonable and principled behavior. This assumption may very well become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Second, at the start of the meeting, establish the principles by which it will be run:

Order: only one person speaks at a time

Focus: focus on the current agenda item and the group's mandate

Efficiency: allocate time to key agenda items, and ask members to keep their remarks brief

Equality: no one speaks a second time on a topic while first time speakers are waiting in line

Decorum: debate must be directed to the issues, and personal attacks must not be tolerated

Safe environment: a respectful tone is maintained, so that no valid input is suppressed

Having established respect for individuals and for mutually agreed-upon principles, you'll have the platform that will add soft strength to your voice and your leadership.

A poker face may be your best option

At the start of a training session, I encountered a challenging situation. Enrolment in the session was limited to 12 participants to ensure that each person had enough time to practice challenging meeting scenarios.

Shortly after we started, I was forced to practice what I was preaching. An unregistered person walked in and asked if he could join the class. I said no, but he persisted, giving several compelling reasons why he deserved to be accommodated. It might have been easy to just say yes, but I said this: *I understand how much you want to be here. At the same time, I hope you can appreciate that the people in this room have paid for a course for 12 attendees, so each of them can get enough practice time. In fairness to them, I have to say no.*

My response persuaded the man to leave, albeit reluctantly. He was barely outside the room when other attendees, thinking that the incident was a simulation and a part of the course, appeared ready to applaud my handling of the situation. I responded with a clear visual signal to refrain from any sign of approval, as the person who left the room wasn't far and would have been able to hear the applause. I later explained that the incident was real and not an enacted situation. Keeping a *poker face* and acting as if the incident had not occurred was the cleanest and safest option for me at the time.

On another occasion I was chairing a contentious meeting and had to address several challenging behaviours, including domination, short tempers, and disrespectful comments. A couple of hours into the meeting we took a break, and several participants stopped by to compliment me on my handling of the meeting. Being mindful of the fact that the so-called *disruptive members* were part of the group, I resisted making any facial expressions. Had I responded favourably to the compliments, I would have compromised my impartiality.

It's about preserving intellectual capacity

Public councils and boards sometimes fail to enforce time limits on presentations by citizens or community groups. This practise is risky, and may produce significant side effects.

Public councils and boards must strike a delicate balance between the right of citizens to be heard and the right of the community as a whole to a robust decision-making process. If much time is lost at the start of a meeting, then issues that are scheduled later on the agenda may be compromised. Elected members may be tired and impatient then, and they may not have the full intellectual capacity to deal with complex issues effectively at that time. This means that the entire community may end up paying the price for the lack of enforcement of time limits.

How can the duty to provide opportunities for the public to be heard be reconciled with the need to allocate enough time for sufficient discussions of issues later at the meeting?

At the start of the meeting, the chair should articulate the rules and time limits on public input. The chair should explain why the time limits must be enforced, and that it is essential to provide time for good coverage of issues by elected officials later in the meeting.

As the public comment period unfolds, the chair or a designated individual should advise speakers how much time they still have and when their time is up.

What can be done if the chair declines to enforce time limits as set out in a policy or a procedure bylaw? Board members must be prepared to speak up: *Point of order. We have a limit of two minutes per public presenter. We have a busy agenda, and we must enforce the rules.*

Applause and heckling: are they in order?

Vocal expressions of approval or disapproval have become common in large gatherings. They are acceptable in some instances, but in others, they can be damaging and risky.

To start, here are three examples of when applause is appropriate:

1. You invited a motivational speaker to address your group, and her message clearly resonates with your members. She receives rounds of applause for connecting with the audience and effectively aligning herself with its needs and expectations.
2. At an annual meeting, the president reports impressive achievements, and his report is well received for its content and delivery.
3. A mayor recognizes an outstanding citizen in front of the public and invites applause.

In the above examples, applause is natural and reinforces the positive aspects of the occasion. There is no apparent harm, and therefore there is nothing to worry about.

Imagine a different scenario. A contentious issue is being debated at a public meeting of a municipality or school board, or in a special general meeting of a society. Speakers are divided on the issues at hand. Comments are greeted by applause from those who agree with them, and by heckling from those who disapprove. These responses are apparently intended to send a message of strength and determination. So, what is the problem?

When dealing with divisive issues, applause and heckling can have a stifling effect. If a speaker representing a certain view is cheered and applauded, those who hold opposing views may be intimidated and hesitate to present valid points. Speakers who are heckled and booed may not feel free to conclude their comments. Even those who are not on either side may be afraid and may feel safer being quiet than speaking in an atmosphere of mob rule.

The obvious losers in such settings are the people who are silenced. But more significantly, the group as a whole can end up losing potentially important insights, which may be indirectly suppressed by the heckling and the clapping. Diversity of views is essential for good decision-making, especially when issues are complex and controversial. Knowledge-based decision making can become impossible in a toxic meeting environment.

The risks of applause and heckling in such settings do not end there. If a public council or board tolerates a toxic meeting environment, it can become the target of adversarial action. Individuals may claim that the board did not manage the meeting environment and therefore it was unsafe for them to present their views. They can claim to have been bullied and harassed. They can also take legal action to seek to invalidate the resulting decisions on the grounds that the process was unfair and that their input was suppressed.

With these risks in mind, the chair of a contentious meeting must take steps to make it safe for all participants, regardless of their views, to speak at the meeting. The chair must show no tolerance for bullying, harassment and anything that can make a meeting environment toxic.

The chair should consider an opening statement like this: *The issues coming before this meeting are challenging and contentious. In order to make sure we benefit from diverse views, we must make it safe for people to speak. With this in mind, I ask everyone to refrain from clapping, heckling and other vocal expressions of approval or disapproval of what people say.*

As the meeting progresses, the chair should monitor the climate. If the *no applause or heckling* rule is breached, the chair must act decisively and restore order. If this proves to be impossible, the meeting may need to be recessed or possibly ended altogether.

If you opt for a recess, prepare a script for when the meeting is resumed, such as:

Before we resume, I need to explain something. This gathering is intended to receive public input on the proposal to re-zone area X. While we fully understand that there is some opposition to the proposal, it is our duty as a public board to maintain a safe environment at this hearing, so all sides can present their views without fear of bullying or intimidation. With this in mind, we will not tolerate heckling, clapping or cheering from now on. Is this clear?

Walking into the lion's den

While getting ready to chair a contentious meeting, it became apparent to me that a small group was organizing itself to oppose everything and fight against '*the establishment*'. My client suggested that I remain tough and that I not worry about this small group. Somehow his confidence did not reassure me, so I asked him to arrange a meeting with the dissenting group. I wanted to learn about their issues and also to build trust in my role as an impartial chair.

The client reacted to my request dismissively. He worried that a separate meeting with this group would legitimize their views, and that it would prove that '*the loudest voice will get the greatest attention*'. However, at my insistence, he arranged for me to meet the group.

Entering the meeting with the dissenting group felt like walking into a lion's den. People seemed tense and suspicious. I opened by briefly explaining my role as an impartial chair. I stressed that my role was procedural and that I had no vested interest in the substantive outcomes of the meeting. I then asked if they had any questions or concerns.

As I expected, they did. They wanted to know more about my credentials and qualifications. They then expressed doubts that they would be treated fairly. In response, I asked that they let me know during the meeting or at a break if they perceived that I was acting in an unfair or biased manner. I also used this opportunity to advise them of the participation guidelines for the meeting. They said the guidelines were logical and fair and agreed to follow them.

Then they made a request: They wanted to make a 15-minute presentation on their key issues. Since the agenda had already been circulated to everyone else, I said I would have to let the larger group decide whether to add this agenda item. They concurred with this approach.

The result of this discussion was that this group came to the meeting the next day ready to work collaboratively with the larger group. Its members developed respect and trust towards the process and acted as constructive partners in consensus building.

Premature interventions can be damaging

While I was chairing a meeting for a client, I heard noise on my left-hand side, which I thought was a side conversation. In my zeal to ensure a picture-perfect meeting, I turned towards the two individuals and said: *Can we please have one meeting at a time?*

As a result of my comment, I got what I asked for: silence...complete silence...eerie silence... The non-verbal feedback from everyone was chilling, but no one said anything.

Shortly thereafter we took a recess. It was then that one of the individuals who was side talking approached me and said: *What you did to us was rude, insensitive and uncaring.*

I was taken aback by her statement, but asked her to elaborate. She continued: *The person sitting next to me is physically disabled. He was experiencing some discomfort, and I tried to help him, while keeping the noise level as low as I could. You did not even bother to check what was going on and proceeded to scold both of us in front of our colleagues.*

I then understood the eerie silence that had followed my intervention. I thanked the individual for sharing her feedback with me and profusely apologized to her. When we resumed the meeting, I apologized to the entire group. Yes, my intervention had been done in good faith and without malice, but it was embarrassing and hurtful to the two individuals. An appropriate response to the `side talking' would have been: *Are things OK? Do you need any help?*

I learned two lessons from this incident.

First lesson: Before you leap in to solve a perceived problem, check what's going on and whether there is an actual problem to solve. Without checking what's going on, any measure you take may not solve the problem, while potentially producing significant side effects.

Second lesson: Make it safe and easy for others to share honest feedback with you. As painful as the feedback may be, welcome it and treat it as a learning opportunity. In my case, I had luckily made it very clear to the group at the start of the meeting that I welcomed their feedback on how I chaired the meeting. Had I not done this, the individual might not have bothered to give me the feedback, and I would not have learned from my mistake.

SHARED DECISION MAKING

Those irresistible, but costly, boardroom indulgences

Do you sometimes indulge yourself with things like rich food, an enticing sugary beverage, or watching Netflix? If so, you will surely remember this phrase: e*verything in moderation, including moderation.*

So, how exactly does this connect to meetings and shared decision making? One of my clients, having read my book, *101 Boardroom Problems and How to Solve Them,* summed it up this way: *What your book is about are boardroom indulgences. Like personal indulgences, they deliver personal pleasures. But the party who ultimately pays the price for these indulgences is often not the direct beneficiary, but the community that they serve.*

What she said made perfect sense. Here are two examples:

Thumbs Up: A trustee on a board of education regularly meets with people who helped him get elected and makes promises to them on how he'll vote on significant issues. At meetings, he pays no attention to the debate and then votes as he promised. When his vote tips the scale and narrowly causes the passage or defeat of a motion, his supporters deliver his reward in the form of applause and *thumbs up* gestures. He receives his rewards, but who pays for the fact that his mind was closed to valid input? The education system, the community, and the children may suffer the damage from the trustee's infatuation with the applause and the *thumbs up.*

The Official Opposition: A member of a local council, annoyed by her colleagues, decides to take on the role of *the official opposition*. For the duration of her term, she always has something negative to say about proposals and presents no ideas that could improve them. When a meeting ends, she is greeted by her reward: a lineup of media reporters who want to interview her. But who might pay the price for this reward? Pandering to the media for attention may cause her colleagues to not trust her, and they may ignore what she says. Then one day, when her concerns are valid and legitimate, others are so accustomed to tuning her out, that they do not listen to her. Without her input, a flawed decision may be made, and that is quite a price for the community to pay for her obsession with media attention.

Was it an unadvertised meeting?

Some years ago, an ombudsperson's report expressed concerns about practices on community councils and boards. A portion of the report addressed perceptions that too many decisions were made away from advertised public meetings. The question was: *What is a Meeting*?

From a technical angle, the issue of w*hat is a meeting* can boil down to a legal question: If a citizen formally challenges the validity of a decision on the grounds that it was made away from an advertised public meeting, might a judge be persuaded to invalidate this decision?

Not being a lawyer, I am not qualified to address the above legal issue. However, I will address the core issues from a common-sense perspective by relying on pragmatic, yet powerful principles. The key question is: What types of interactions away from an advertised public meeting can be reasonably perceived as constituting an unadvertised meeting?

Let me start with the basic requirement. With the exception of confidential items, which are dealt with during closed meetings, public bodies are required to make their decisions in duly advertised open meetings. This principle seems to suggest that most board or council decisions should not be materially advanced or arrived at while away from an advertised public meeting. The open meeting requirement is intended to promote honest, transparent and accountable government. Under it, the community is provided with notices of meeting agendas, and citizens can thereby make informed decisions on whether to attend and observe the proceedings. They can also request to speak to the public body, as per established public comment procedures.

Here is a practical tool that can help you assess whether a gathering might be reasonably perceived to be an unadvertised meeting. I propose that elected officials function as though they are *always under the public microscope* and can always be seen and heard by the public.

With the public microscope in mind, let us examine four examples of unadvertised gatherings.

Example 1: A significant number of members of a public board are observed at a bar, engaged in a lively conversation. A heated discussion about contentious current issues ensues, with strong views expressed in favour of and against certain proposals. Would an observing citizen conclude that this gathering is, in effect, an unadvertised meeting? I believe a reasonably informed citizen would reply in the affirmative.

Example 2: Two members of a public board meet in private. They discuss a plot to achieve majority support for a motion that they plan to originate. After the gathering, each member makes calls and sends emails to other board members to lobby them to vote *yes*. This effort is successful, and the motion is adopted at the next open meeting. Would an observing citizen conclude that the decision-making process was substantially advanced, that the initial gathering and the subsequent lobbying were, in effect, an unadvertised meeting, and that this may have breached at least the spirit of the open meeting requirement? I believe a reasonably informed citizen would respond in the affirmative.

Example 3: The entire membership of a public board attends a community reception, where the achievements of remarkable citizens are celebrated. Would this in itself constitute an unadvertised meeting? I believe a reasonably informed citizen would say no, as long as the elected members avoid conversations that substantially advance the board's decision-making processes. The same citizen might also suggest that, wherever practical, board members should not be seated or standing in a configuration that resembles a meeting, for optics sake, and also in order to reduce any temptation to engage in substantive debates.

Example 4: A public board attends an in-house training session on meeting procedures. The session includes tools that can help make meetings more focused, inclusive, and efficient. Would a reasonably informed citizen conclude that this is an unadvertised meeting? I believe the reply would be in the negative. In this case, public trust would be earned even further if the chair reminds everyone, at least once at the start of the training session, of the open meeting requirement, and of the need to avoid discussing substantive issues at the session.

The open meeting requirement is largely an issue of reasonableness and common sense. I wish it were possible to quantify, codify or legislate common sense, but I don't think it is.

Is your board too trusting?

During a family visit, my brother invited me to observe a meeting of his non-profit board. I agreed, albeit reluctantly, as this was not exactly my idea of vacation fun. When the meeting was convened, my brother surprised me with a formal introduction to the group, bragging about my work with boards. I blushed a little, but then sat silently and observed the meeting.

Just before the meeting ended, my brother surprised me yet again. He asked the board chair if I could be asked to share observations about the meeting. I guess you could call it brotherly love.

After a quick recovery from the surprise, I shared some general observations about the meeting. But then I realized that a significant issue was troubling me: the board had made a multi-million-dollar decision on the basis of a document that had been placed in front of the directors at the start of the meeting. With this in mind, I asked a question: *How many of you received and read this report before the meeting?* No hand went up, but there was a sense of surprise. Then I said: *So, you voted on a multi-million-dollar real estate deal. On what basis did you vote YES*?

To make a long story short, it boiled down to trust. They voted YES on the investment primarily because they trusted the chief executive officer (CEO). Without any advance notice, it was impossible to dissect the report from an informed position. Under these circumstances, it was unlikely that the directors would exercise meaningful due diligence, assess risk, and cast a confident vote from a position of definitive knowledge.

Was this deficiency problematic for this board? In this case, the risk levels seemed low, because the CEO had a solid track record and there was no doubt in anyone's mind that he was honest and trustworthy. But, even so, what if the CEO had inadvertently made an innocent error or underestimated the risks? Even the most conscientious, principled and competent person is capable of making inadvertent errors. For that reason, any CEO and any organization need more than trust as the basis for decision making. It needs due diligence and healthy questioning from a position of knowledge.

You may have heard this phrase - *Trust, but verify*. Trust is indeed a precious commodity on boards, but it must be constantly earned and must never be taken for granted. Trust must be supplemented by healthy questioning to test the strength and sustainability of significant decisions. This due diligence would be difficult or impossible to exercise, unless there are meaningful opportunities to review relevant documents well in advance of decision making.

Tax dollars and an unsafe work environment

Why do people run for public office? A common campaign promise is to ensure tax dollars are spent wisely. Are such promises always kept? Keep on reading.

Consider what happens in a public meeting when a staff member presents a report that casts doubt on the viability of a politically popular proposal. How do elected officials respond? Most of them listen and consider staff input. But some may respond harshly and, in effect, *shoot the messenger* because they object to the message. In some settings, things get worse, and the honesty and integrity of staff members may come under assault at a public meeting.

How do staff members respond to such insults and personal attacks? Experienced staff members may develop *a thick skin* over time and tolerate such treatment as part of working for local government. Over the short term this approach may work, but in time, a toxic and disrespectful environment may cause substantial risks and liabilities.

If staff members are treated disrespectfully, even *a thick skin* may not prevent the abuse from penetrating, causing fatigue and stress. If things become intolerable, a very capable but unhappy staff member may be lured away with offers of more money and benefits or, more significantly, a positive work environment elsewhere. Recruiting and training a competent replacement can be disruptive, time consuming, and expensive. Would this series of events be consistent with the vision of wise and prudent expenditure of tax dollars? Clearly not.

But the story does not end here. Let us suppose that a competent staff replacement is found. Suppose they are capable of performing at what we'll call level 8. A positive work environment may motivate this professional to quickly move up the performance scale to level 10. But in a toxic work environment, this promising talent may very well retreat to level 4, where they are less vulnerable to publicly expressed doubts about their competence, honesty and integrity.

So, let's do the math: You hire a professional who is capable of performing at a level worth $100,000 per year. In a positive environment the individual is likely to perform at a $125,000 level. But a toxic work environment may diminish their performance to a level worth $50,000 a year. So, you are paying $100,000 a year for a $50,000 performance. How does this math jive with the desire to ensure tax dollars are well spent?

Scrabble and effective decision making

Scrabble is my favorite board game. I enjoy the mathematics and how I can double or triple my points using different strategies. The game is partly won on luck, partly on word knowledge, and partly on strategy. I appreciate the game for teaching me a seemingly endless number of new words. Playing it is also a great way to relax while keeping intellectually engaged.

Lately I've discovered various parallels between the game of Scrabble and how decisions are made on governing bodies. Below are some examples for you to consider.

Winning: When I started playing Scrabble, my only goal was to personally accumulate the highest number of points, and to defeat my opponent. This mindset has changed. Together, we try to maximize the cumulative total of our points. If either one of us sees the other making a questionable strategic move, we ask: *Are you sure you want to do this? You could double your points by doing that...* So, instead of playing a win-lose game, it is now a win-win game.

Could boards of directors use the same principle and identify win-win solutions to help their organizations and communities succeed? The win-lose process can be risk-prone and costly.

The long view: I used to play every Scrabble move to maximize my points right away, even if the move constrained my options later in the game. Now before making a move, we consider its potential impacts on the subsequent evolution of the game. With this principle in mind, we often opt for fewer points in the short term and make room for better opportunities to emerge later on, resulting in a game that is less frustrating and more fun.

Might boards of directors consider a similar approach? Instead of always seeking to maximize short-term gains, might they learn to be patient and thoughtful and embrace a long-term view on decision making?

Perspective: In the early stages of a Scrabble game, everyone welcomes high value letters: Q and Z yield 10 points each, and J and X yield eight points each. However, in late stages of the game, these letters can become a liability, as one gets heavily penalized for not using them before the game ends. If one of us gets a Q or a Z near the end of a game, panic sets in. Governed by the desire to minimize our losses, we may be tempted to dump the high value letters as quickly as possible, and we may thereby miss opportunities to create positive gains later in the game.

Do boards sometimes miss opportunities to *create* positive outcomes because they are too busy trying to *prevent* negative outcomes?

The pause button: As we play Scrabble, we sometimes get stuck with all consonants or all vowels. This used to make us frantic and stressed. Nowadays, we take a short break and have a cup of tea. Five minutes later, the creative juices kick in and an obvious solution to the predicament is identified, leading to astonishment: *How did I miss it when it was right there?*

Similarly, when boards are stuck with seemingly insurmountable obstacles and a range of bad decision-making options, might a short break re-energize everyone and fetch new options? Try *pushing the pause button* from time to time.

Following the rules: We used to play Scrabble strictly by the rules. One such rule prohibits the use of a dictionary during the game. This rule made perfect sense in the era when our sole desire was to achieve the highest personal score and win the game. But now, with our win-win disposition, we are liberated. We worry less about rules and more about enjoying the game. So, yes, we do violate some rules, but we learn new words and have much more fun this way.

Should boards learn when and how to responsibly suspend some constraining rules, such as the rules on processing amendments? Might this flexibility help them optimize their decisions?

As a final note: Besides the valuable lessons it offers on life and on board decision making, Scrabble truly is a great board game. Try it. You may like it.

Community engagement pays off

There are far too many examples of failures in group decision making, and it is refreshing to hear a success story. This is a positive story about a religious congregation with a problem to solve: its prayer hall was too small to accommodate its growing membership. The choice was between three options: do nothing and tolerate increasingly crammed quarters; rent a larger hall, meaning increased membership fees; or *bite the bullet* and purchase the congregation's own building, requiring a special membership levy to fund an outright purchase.

Beyond the decision itself, the board of directors was concerned about the process to be followed in making the decision. They wanted to ensure the members were on side and fully included in defining the problem and choosing the right solution. Upon reflection, the board decided to initiate a *community consultation program*. The process was thereby turned from what could have been a divisive money-focused exercise into a community building effort.

The board proceeded by dividing the membership list of 100 families into 10 groups. Each of the 10 board members was assigned 10 families to contact and discuss the congregation's future. The consultation took the form of tea time in members' homes or a discussion by phone. Some members asked to have discussions with other families, so they would get to know others and learn from what they thought. All families were included in this process.

After two months of consultations, the feedback from the members was compiled and analyzed. The board's conclusion was that the congregation was ready to have its own building. A special meeting was then convened, and the board proposed the purchase and the special levy to fund it. After some debate, the motion was adopted, although not unanimously.

Notwithstanding the opposition by some members, not one family left the congregation, and all families paid their portions of the special levy. The reason why dissenters did not vote with their feet and leave was simple: they were treated as valued partners in decision making and were genuinely listened to.

The lesson: The quality of the decisions that your group makes is important, but equally important, and often more so, is the process by which these decisions are reached. Looking beyond financial considerations, the congregation had a much stronger currency than dollars and cents: the strong sense of collaboration, unity, cohesion, and community spirit.

Is the majority always right?

During a coffee break at a training session, a newly elected municipal official spoke to me privately and said this: *A wise person taught me that with a council of seven members, the most important number is four. With four votes you can change policy. With four votes you can provide exceptional leadership. With four votes you are at liberty to govern however you wish. After all, the majority is always right. What do you think about these words of wisdom?*

On the surface, what he said sounded correct. After all, in parliamentary democracies, a basic principle of decision making is that *the majority rules*. In order to adopt a proposal or enforce a measure, a voting body requires that more members vote yes than vote no. If not, the motion is defeated. With this in mind, the numbers are ultimately the only thing that matter. Right?

Not so fast. Something significant is missing with this logic.

Here is the problem: Have you ever observed an aggressive and impatient majority forcing its will on a helpless minority by cutting off debate prematurely? Ever witnessed a majority being stubbornly entrenched and unwilling to tolerate new data that might lead to enlightened and thoughtful decisions? In such cases, there may very well be enough votes in the affirmative, but this does not change the fact that the decision-making process is flawed; possibly leading to flawed decisions that the majority, the minority, and the community, will regret.

Yes, the numbers are important. But if the group focuses exclusively on the number of votes, it may be making its collective decisions on the basis of ignorance, self interest, and loud and aggressive voices, instead of making them on the basis of objectivity, full knowledge, and a careful analysis of the issues at hand.

With *numbers-based democracies*, the end—getting enough votes—justifies the means, which may prompt some people to make pre-meeting deals on how they'll vote. On the other hand, with *knowledge-based democracies*, members refuse to commit their votes in advance of a meeting. Instead, they arrive at meetings with fully open minds, listen to and learn from everyone, and treat minorities as partners in decision making.

With *numbers-based democracies*, assertive and persuasive advocates tend to prevail. With *knowledge-based democracies*, the individuals with the most relevant information and the most astute and compelling analysis are listened to. The group has a culture that promotes learning, inquiry and excellence in decision making.

Ultimately, *numbers-based democracies* are more likely to produce flawed and risk-prone decisions. On the other hand, *knowledge-based democracies* are more likely to produce informed decisions that increase opportunities and minimize risks for affected organizations.

Is it possible to be too collegial?

A business colleague told me a story of a very collegial board that was looking for opportunities to make a substantial investment. After reviewing and rejecting several investment proposals, some board members were getting impatient and anxious about losing revenue while waiting for the right investment opportunity to come knocking.

Sure enough, opportunity did eventually knock, and the investment proposal that came with it seemed promising. Board members were jubilant and thrilled. At last they found a safe home for the available funds. Most were eager to move forward, except for one quiet member. Given his own investment expertise, he could identify significant flaws in the proposal.

Given his concerns, this board member faced a dilemma. He suspected that the proposal was not as good as it was made out to be. But when he saw the enthusiastic faces of his colleagues who were eager to move forward and were getting to be impatient, he was loathe to spoil their enthusiasm. He hesitated for a moment and decided to remain silent.

The proposal was then accepted and the money was promptly invested. Shortly thereafter, the financial results indicated that this was not such a good investment after all. As the losses mounted, the collegiality vanished and people began to look for guilty parties. It was then discovered that a board member suspected there were problems with the proposal and did not voice his concerns. Consequently, this member was sued for being silent. The premise was that his duty to speak up was more important than his wanting to avoid annoying his colleagues.

The colleague who related this story to me did not know the result of the lawsuit, and, really, that is not the point of this story. As I considered it, this incident raised an interesting question: was this silent board member solely responsible for the financial losses? Or, did the fault lie equally with the board's overwhelming enthusiasm for the investment, which, in effect created a toxic meeting environment? Can the fear of upsetting colleagues impair a member's ability to focus on optimizing organizational benefits while minimizing risks?

So, yes, there is a risk in being too collegial.

The world's worst public speaker?

Sometime ago, I was retained to chair a series of meetings. As I usually do, I sought to engage all participants in discussions, including those who tended to be quiet.

As I became familiar with the participants and their strengths, I approached one of them and asked her to make a 10-minute presentation at the next meeting. I asked her to cover a topic that she was very familiar with. Her instinctive response was: *Eli, I am the world's worst public speaker. When I speak in public, my heart pounds, my knees shake, and my palms sweat.*

I responded by acknowledging that public speaking was indeed one of humanity's greatest fears, but encouraged her to make the presentation despite this difficulty. I also offered to help her with any advice if needed. Reluctantly, she finally agreed to make the presentation.

She did not contact me for any advice, and I began to worry. A few days before the next meeting, I called to see how she was doing. She said she was getting her presentation ready, but was still very unsure about handling stage fright.

The day of the meeting arrived. Much to my surprise, and that of others, her presentation was flawless. The content was inspiring and thought provoking. The delivery was smooth and no nervousness was apparent. When she concluded, she received a spontaneous standing ovation from the group. If she had been nervous, it clearly did not show. If that was *the world's worst public speaker*, I wondered what the best one was like.

The lessons?

First, when guiding a group's decision-making process, do not limit your attention to the obvious leaders. Expand your outlook and search for leaders among the quieter and less visible members. This will provide the group with diverse ideas and will also expand its leadership base. Remember: *One of a leader's most important roles is to build more leaders.*

Second, if someone hesitates to take on a leadership role, don't give up too easily. Show confidence in the individual's ability, and give them the gentle nudge they may need to handle a new and somewhat uncomfortable task. Individuals need this support to build confidence and develop new skills and will ultimately be grateful for your support.

Which hat am I wearing now?

Consider this scenario: a national board consists of representatives who are elected by provincial units. Prior to a national board meeting, a constituency's board becomes alarmed about a motion that appears on the agenda. They discuss it and vote to direct Rick, their representative on the national board, to vote against this motion.

At the national board meeting, the debate on the contentious motion is heated. As the debate unfolds, Rick learns new things about the justifications for the motion. He also listens to input from the professional advisors, and realizes that things are not as simple as they had seemed. As a result of this extra information, he votes in favour of the motion.

At the next meeting of his constituency board, Rick's colleagues learn how he had voted and get very angry: *You betrayed us. It's unthinkable that you would refuse to vote against that motion, when a majority vote of our board had ordered you to do so.* The board then seeks professional advice on how to rescind Rick's election to the constituency unit's board.

Upon receiving a similar inquiry from a client some years ago, my advice was contrary to what they had expected. I advised that, although it was fine to share input with their representative and expect that they would share it, they should never have given directions on how to vote. I suggested they follow the *two hats* model for constituency representation, as shown below:

- Before a national board meeting, a constituency representative would obtain input from their board on scheduled issues. At this point, the representative would be wearing their *constituency hat* and commit to present the constituency's input at the national meeting.

- At the national board meeting, each constituency representative would share relevant input from their unit. They would still be wearing the *constituency hat*.

- After giving their input, all representatives would switch from the *constituency hat* to the *national hat.* They would listen to and learn from input from other constituencies and also learn from input provided by the national management team and subject matter experts.

- When it comes to voting, all national board members would be duty bound to vote based on the full range of input, knowledge, and professional expertise presented. Each member would be expected to cast a knowledge-based vote, wearing *the national hat.* They must never be constrained by formal or informal directions given ahead of the meeting.

After the meeting, all representatives would inform their constituency units of the decisions that were made at the national level. They would also inform their colleagues at the constituency level on how the *two hats* model must work and why.

Does your message get lost in your delivery?

During a workshop held for the council of a small village, a participant spoke about a community member who was always very critical, harsh and abusive towards elected leaders and staff members. No one could ever live up to his expectations, and he treated others as if they were malicious and incompetent. He was also loud and condescending. The workshop participant asked what advice I might offer for dealing with such a *toxic individual*.

Before I could reply, another participant interrupted and related her story. She told us about a conversation she had with the so-called *toxic individual*. Instead of being distracted by his manner, she engaged in a conversation with him and kept on asking him clarifying questions.

At the end of her discussion with the individual, she summed up his concerns as she understood them, and asked him to confirm whether her understanding was correct. When she received the nod, she said: *Thank you very much for your input. It is very helpful. By the way, can I give you some feedback? You have such valuable insights to share, and you have taught me so much just now. It's just too bad that your valuable message sometimes gets lost in your delivery.*

Her story offered everyone two important lessons:

The first lesson is for those who receive tough feedback: listen to the core messages, without being distracted by the harsh delivery. Do not become instinctively dismissive of someone whose communication style is aggressive. Keep in mind that, within the emotional content, there may be some hidden nuggets of wisdom that you can learn from.

The second lesson is for those who need to communicate tough messages: make it easy for others to listen and learn from your wisdom and knowledge. Prevent your delivery from interfering with, and possibly diminishing, the strength and value of your message. Use a tone that shows respect for others, even if they have given you reasons to not respect them.

Are you really interested in my answer?

In my work as a professional parliamentarian and an impartial meeting chair, I routinely deal with conflict and controversy. Usually, the hostility is directed at those who hire me or the proposals they bring forward. However, there are times when the hostility is directed at me.

One such event occurred just before a contentious annual general meeting. A vocal member was apparently offended by the procedural rules that I provided that were distributed before the meeting. His first step was to confront his president. When the president indicated that I, and not him, was the source of the rules, the man approached me. He angrily criticized my advice and suggested that I really knew very little about Robert's Rules of Order.

As I was listening to him, I had two difficulties: first, there were only a few minutes left until the scheduled start of the meeting, and opening a contentious meeting late could have added to the already high levels of anxiety. Second, I had a sense that whatever explanations I gave this man were likely to fall on deaf ears.

As I considered my response, something suddenly occurred to me, and I said: *Sir, I believe I understand your questions. But I have one question for you: Are you really interested in hearing my answers?*

My question must have surprised him. He paused for a few seconds to consider his response. He then said clearly and emphatically: *NO, not really*, and walked away. I too walked away, and the meeting started on time. His procedural concerns must have somehow been addressed, because he did not subsequently disrupt the meeting.

RULES OF ORDER - DEMYSTIFIED

Surprising quotes from Robert's Rules of Order

Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (RONR) is the most commonly used manual on parliamentary procedure. The 12th edition of RONR has more than 700 pages of rules.

Studying RONR can be interesting. However, there is a risk of becoming so immersed in the technical rules, that one forgets the essential principles upon which they are founded. With this in mind, I thought to share seven somewhat surprising RONR quotes that I refer to the most.

NOTE: RONR uses 'he' to refer to everyone and refers to its rules as parliamentary law.

The first quote relates to the purposes of parliamentary procedure.

Quote #1
The application of parliamentary law is the best method yet devised to enable assemblies of any size, with due regard for every member's opinion, to arrive at the general will on the maximum number of questions of varying complexity in a minimum amount of time and under all kinds of internal climate ranging from total harmony to hardened or impassioned division of opinion.

Put differently, parliamentary procedure is intended to facilitate group decision making in a manner that is orderly, focused, efficient, equally inclusive, civilized and respectful. Conversely, the procedure is also intended to prevent disorderly and unfocused debates, domination by assertive members, shouting matches, personal attacks and wasted time.

The next two quotes from RONR Section 4 address common misconceptions about the seconding of a motion. Many assume that the seconder must support the proposed motion. Some also assume that if, by chance, a motion is not seconded, the world will quickly fall apart.

Quote #2
A second merely implies that the seconder agrees that the motion should come before the meeting and not that he necessarily favours the motion. A member may second a motion because he would like to see the assembly go on record as rejecting the proposal, if he believes the vote on the motion would have such a result.

Quote #3
After debate has begun or, if there is no debate, after any member has voted, the lack of a second has become immaterial and it is too late to make a point of order that the motion has not been seconded. Surprised? So was I was when I first read these words.

The fourth quote from RONR Section 4 deals with the assumption that, once a motion is moved and seconded, it must be opened for debate, even if it is poorly worded.

Quote #4

The chair—either on his own initiative or at the secretary's request—can require any main motion, amendment, or instructions to a committee to be in writing before he states the question.

In other words, a proposed motion has no status until the chair places it before the assembly, and no chair should do that if a motion is incomplete, confusing or ambiguous.

The fifth quote from RONR Section 23 deals with the fear people have about agreeing to run meetings under RONR and becoming overwhelmed by 700 pages of rules.

Quote #5

In ordinary meetings it is undesirable to raise points of order on minor irregularities of a purely technical character, if it is clear that no one's rights are being infringed upon and no real harm is being done to the proper transaction of business.

The next two quotes from Section 47 express the need to apply rules of order in a sensible manner, and to avoid being overly strict in a relatively collaborative meeting environment.

Quote #6

...any presiding officer will do well to bear in mind that no rules can take the place of tact and common sense on the part of the chair…

And lastly, Quote #7

The president should never be technical or stricter than is necessary for the good of the meeting. Good judgment is essential; the assembly may be of such a nature, through its unfamiliarity with parliamentary usage and its peaceable disposition, that strict enforcement of the rules, instead of assisting, would greatly hinder business. But in large assemblies where there is much work to be done, and especially where there is the likelihood of trouble, the only safe course is to require a strict observance of the rules.

Meeting behind closed doors? (Part 1)

It is sometimes alleged that public bodies meet behind closed doors too often and without legitimate reasons for doing so. Perceptions of too much secrecy can diminish public trust in a public board or council.

To address the issue of confidentiality, it is important that all elected members, staff, and citizens understand the parameters that relate to closed meetings. Public clarifications on why and how items are classified as confidential can help build public trust and reduce criticism.

The justifications for closed meetings are sometimes spelled out in the applicable legislation or in bylaws or policies. In some jurisdictions, closed meeting provisions are detailed and explicit. In others, the applicable legislation or policies leave it to the governing body to determine if the public interest would be served by discussing certain types of issues behind closed doors.

In general terms, when considering whether to meet behind closed doors, a public board or council needs to weigh two competing principles: one is the overall requirement to conduct the bulk of its business in a transparent and publicly accountable manner; the other is the need to minimize organizational risk and the need to protect the privacy of individuals.

In local government settings, there is often reference to the three Ls (law, land, and labour) as being potential justifications for closed meetings. The first L (law) refers to ongoing or potential litigation that the organization may initiate or be subjected to. The second L (land) may point to sensitive and significant land transactions that require confidentiality. The third L (labour) may relate to contract negotiations with staff, or issues that may affect the privacy of an employee (hiring or disciplinary matters), or issues that affect the privacy of a third party.

Finally, on a light note: The term *in camera meeting* is often used to describe a meeting behind closed doors. In Latin, *in camera* means *in a room,* or *in private*. It does not mean, as some believe, that pictures are taken, and that therefore everyone must put on their best attire.

Meeting behind closed doors? (Part 2)

Part 1 of this article discusses the criteria for placing items on closed meeting agendas. Part 2 addresses seven interesting questions that have arisen in connection with closed meetings.

1. *On our board, we include open meeting items and closed meeting items on the same meeting agenda. When we're about to deal with a confidential item, we ask non-members to leave the room, and return when we're done with this item. Is this approach appropriate?*

   Although this approach is common, it causes practical difficulties. First, non-members—staff or citizens—wait outside the room without knowing when they can come back. Second, this approach can mix confidential and non-confidential items in the same set of minutes. The preferred approach is to schedule two separate meetings on the same day, one being an open meeting and the other a closed meeting. Non-members can then observe the open meeting and are asked to leave when it is adjourned. There are two separate agendas and two sets of minutes, one non-confidential and the other confidential.

2. *What process should be followed when an outsider, such as a legal advisor, is invited to attend a closed meeting*?

   Two steps may be needed. The first is to authorize the individual to attend the portion of the closed meeting to which their expertise applies. The second step is to confirm that the advisor acknowledges the duty to keep things confidential, either verbally or in writing.

3. *How should our board deal with leaks from closed meetings?*

   a) To start, you need to reduce the likelihood of leaks. Consider the following measures: ensure that everyone understands the damage caused by leaks, such as increased risk and diminished trust among members;
   b) Make a statement at the start a closed meeting, reminding everyone of the policies or legislative provisions under which agenda items have been deemed to be confidential.

   What if confidentiality breaches still occur? One response would be to discuss the breach with the group at its next closed meeting and request support. A firmer response may be needed if the identity of the person who broke confidentiality is known, if the leak seems deliberate, and if the damage from the leak is substantial. In such cases, punitive measures may need to be considered, under the provisions within your governing documents.

4. *I know we're not supposed to share information from closed meetings. But it is really hard to hold things back from my spouse after a closed meeting, especially when the debate was difficult and emotional. Can anything be done to help me cope with such a situation?*

   There are two ways to answer this question. The formal reply is that your spouse is not a voting member, and therefore it is not acceptable to divulge any confidential information to them. A less dogmatic and more pragmatic approach (tried by some organizations) may be to require spouses of voting members to swear an oath of confidentiality.

5. *I represent my municipal council on a regional board. What can be done to allow me to discuss sensitive regional issues that affect my community with my own mayor and council?*

   To authorize the release of confidential information by regional board members, the board should vote on a motion to authorize them to discuss specific confidential information with their own councils, with the stipulation that this be done during closed council meetings.

6. *Who should take minutes in a closed meeting?*

   One option is to have a staff member, formally designated as a confidential secretary, take closed meeting minutes. Another option is to have one of the voting members take the minutes. Either way, given the goal of minimizing exposure to risk, closed meeting minutes should capture only the topics and the outcomes, and must exclude quotes or detailed summaries.

7. *On our board, we have the practice of debating sensitive political issues during closed meetings to enable honest and robust discussions and to make it safe for elected members to ask silly questions. Is this practice acceptable?*

   Closed meetings are intended to protect organizations from risk, and not, as some believe, to protect elected officials from embarrassment. Honest and robust discussions, during which 'silly questions' may be asked are not by themselves valid reasons for holding closed meetings.

It's like pushing the pause button

Consider this scenario: as the debate on a motion unfolds, it becomes clear that the group is not ready to vote on the motion at that meeting, possibly because more analysis or a cooling off period is needed. The body may then vote *to refer* the motion to staff or to a committee, or it may vote *to postpone* consideration of the main motion to another time.

The question is: what happens when the main motion comes back to the group at a later meeting? Does it have to be moved and seconded again before it can be considered?

The answer is no. Proposing that a pending main motion be referred or postponed does not erase anything that was done, including the steps of moving and seconding the main motion. If the proposal to refer or postpone the main motion is adopted, all it means is that the main motion is set aside for now. It's like *pushing the pause button*.

With this in mind, when the main motion is brought back to the group at a subsequent meeting, the pause button is released. The main motion is then back before the group in its original form and the debate on it resumes. There is no need to move and second the main motion again, since it had not been withdrawn.

So, how should the chair proceed when the main motion is brought back to the group?

If the motion had been referred to a committee, then, after the committee presents its report, the chair would say: *Having heard the committee's report, the main motion that was referred to the committee is now pending* (main motion is read). *Is there any debate on this motion?*

If the main motion had been postponed, then, under *unfinished business*, the chair would say: *The first item under unfinished business is the main motion that was postponed to this meeting. The main motion is as follows* (main motion is read). *Is there any debate on this motion?*

Calling the question

At a large convention of a political party, a contentious resolution was on the agenda. A delegate moved that the resolution be adopted and another delegate seconded it. The chair invited the mover to speak on the motion, and he promptly said: *I call the question.* The chair proceeded by immediately closing debate and taking a vote on the motion, even though quite a few delegates were waiting to debate it.

Was the chair correct in ending the debate at the request of just one individual, thereby depriving others of the opportunity to speak? The sensible answer is no. But many people still think that when someone *calls the question*, debate must end immediately and an immediate vote must be taken on the pending motion. In fact, this assumption is incorrect.

Under parliamentary procedure, the decision to end debate on a motion is made by the group, collectively, and not unilaterally by the chair or by a member *calling the question*. With this in mind, many delegates were deprived of their right to debate.

The decision to end debate on a motion can be made without a motion, by unanimous consent. The chair can ask: Is there any further discussion? Then pause, and if no one wishes to speak, say: there being no further discussion, we will proceed to the vote. On the other hand, if there are objections to ending the debate, the decision to do so is made by a formal vote.

Minutes of the last meeting of a term of office

Some organizations face the question of who should approve the minutes of the final meeting of a term of office of a board or a council. The concern is: if approval is delayed until the new governing body's first meeting, its members, some of whom may be new, would not be able to make an informed decision about the accuracy of the minutes.

There are four options to consider.

The first option is for the minute taker to be very well organized prior to the final meeting and prepare an almost complete template based on the agenda. Then, just before the adjournment of the meeting, a short recess would be taken, to enable the minute taker to finalize the minutes. After the recess, the departing governing body could approve its own minutes.

The second option is to appoint a minutes approval committee and delegate the task of approving the minutes to it. To be effective, this committee's membership should include at least some individuals who attended the meeting.

The third option is to schedule a special meeting of the departing body solely for the sake of approving the final meeting's minutes. This may not be an efficient option, but it's an option.

The fourth option is to bring the minutes forward to the incoming body for approval. Of course, this would not be optimal, especially if there is a substantial turnover in membership. However, the incoming body would have the authority to approve the minutes, and would need to rely on the staff and any continuing members to verify the accuracy of the document.

Should movers and seconders be recorded in minutes?

Following the principle of objectivity, minutes of meetings should focus on the group collectively and not on individuals. With this principle in mind, it is recommended that names of movers and seconders not be recorded in minutes.

Let us start with the seconder. The individual seconding a motion may be doing so only to get the motion debated, and not necessarily because they favour it. In fact, a person may second a motion because they oppose it and would like to see it formally rejected. Recording their name next to the motion would give a false impression of support.

What about the mover? Although a mover is generally presumed to be in favour of the motion when they introduce it, they may change their mind during the debate, and may therefore vote against the motion. As such, recording the mover's name in the minutes can be misleading.

Then there is the question of ownership. Recording the mover and seconder gives the false impression that the two of them own the motion forever and have exclusive control over it, when, in fact, this is incorrect. Once debate begins, ownership of a motion shifts to the group.

The issue of who owns the motion is more than just a technicality. I never cease to be amazed at how the false idea that the mover and seconder own the motion in perpetuity can paralyze a governing body. On several occasions, I found governing bodies believing they could not rescind or amend an adopted motion because the mover and seconder refused to allow this to happen. Such a misconception can turn a decision-making process from democratic to unilateral.