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Calling & Pointing: Common Traps and Pitfalls

By William J. Puette PhD, PRP, CP

“The larger the assembly, the more readily it will detect the slightest weakness in a presiding officer. Efforts to capitalize on any such failing may follow with sometimes disastrous results.”


It is the responsibility of the presiding officer to maintain order and enforce the rules, while at the same time assuring members a safe and respectful environment that encourages civil debate. Granting recognition to members who are entitled to the floor is a principal duty of the presiding officer under parliamentary law (RONR, p. 449).

Woody Allen is quoted as saying, “time is nature’s way to keep everything from happening at once.” Likewise, the process of obtaining recognition from the presiding officer before speaking is intended to keep speeches from happening all at once. Recognition from the chair grants the member the exclusive right to be heard at that time.

Exceptions to this requirement are permitted only in specific situations, such as seconding a motion, making a nomination from the floor, and rising to a question which is pressing and/or if urgency requires it. The right to speak without first being recognized is not the same as the right to move an interrupting motion that is in order when another has the floor as described in each motion’s standard descriptive characteristic 3.

The current edition of RONR describes 86 motions. Only a select few may be made without the words “1 move...” These exceptions imply extraordinary circumstances and include notably those that are made by “calling” for something or raising a “point” of something.
Calling

The word “call” is primarily used to describe official directions executed by a chair or secretary: calling the meeting to order, calling the roll, sending out the call of the meeting, etc. When used to describe the action of a member, the term “call” suggests a right or privilege of a single member to move or demand something without a second, even when another member has the floor. Indeed, RONR allows members of the assembly the following four “calls,” which may be made when another has the floor and do not require a second (See tinted page 40):

- Calling a member to order (RONR, pp. 45-46)
- Call for the Orders of the Day (RONR, pp. 219-224)
- Call for Division of the Assembly (RONR, pp, 280-282)
- Call for separate vote(s) on one or more of a series of unrelated resolutions that have been offered by a single motion (RONR, pp. 110, 274-75), or on one or more of a series of amendments on which the chair has stated the question in gross (RONR, pp. 523, 535-36, 540)

The common misapplication of the right to “call,” as it is understood above, is the accepted aberration, “calling the question,” which RONR allows, while at the same time making clear it is actually the subsidiary motion for the Previous Question which does require a second and is only in order after the maker has been recognized by the chair: “Calls of ‘Question!’ by members from their seats are not motions for the Previous Question and are disorderly if another member is speaking or seeking recognition.” RONR, p. 207.

Pointing

The term “point” is another word that, in the context of parliamentary procedure, can be misunderstood and improperly used. There are two contexts in which a member may properly raise a “point.” These are calling the chair’s attention to a breach of order, and making a request for information.

RONR has clarified Point of Information by renaming it Request for Information (pp. 294-295). Though it may still be accepted if raised as a Point of Information, it is actually an incidental motion in the category of Requests and
Inquiries. It is not, as the word “point” unfortunately suggests, an opportunity to introduce, inject or share information, no matter how invaluable the speaker believes it to be. The revelation of such information is reserved to debate, not for requests and inquiries. RONR, pp. 292-299.

Since the process of asking a factual or procedural question and receiving a response is not generally counted as speaking in debate (RONR p. 389, II. 6-7), the time limits on debate do not apply (see also RONR p. 396,11.20-22).1

Safeguards against abusing requests and inquiries sneaking into debate need to be enforced.

First, the members asking the question may ask them only through the chair. Secondly, to avoid being considered as debate, questions and inquiries should not be rhetorical questions, thinly veiled opinions or commentary, or loaded insinuations or attacks on the character of other members. In other words, requests and inquiries must be held to the same standards of decorum applicable to debate.

Likewise, there is a difference between an inquiry and an inquisition. An inquiry is directed to the presiding officer, even if the question arises from a reporting officer, committee chair or other speaker. The chair may answer the question him or herself, or the chair may ask someone else to answer. Since it is possible that the chair or a respondent recognized by the chair will not know the answer to a Request for Information, it should be understood that neither the chair nor any other officer or member is required to provide an answer that fully satisfies the requestor. Indeed, after the member has asked a question or made an inquiry, that member no longer has recognition and is not automatically entitled to a follow-up question or questions in the manner of an inquisitor or prosecutor, except in the context of a disciplinary hearing.

Similarly, a Question of Privilege (whether personal or of the assembly) is a request directed to and decided by the chair:

“If a pressing situation is affecting a right or privilege of the assembly or of an individual member (for example, noise, inadequate ventilation, introduction of a confidential subject in the presence of guests, etc.), a
member can raise a question of privilege (19), which permits him to interrupt pending business to state an urgent request or motion.

If the matter is not simple enough to be taken care of informally, the chair then makes a ruling as to whether it is admitted as a question of privilege and whether it requires consideration before the pending business is resumed.” RONR, p.67,

In RONR, there is no such thing as a “point of personal privilege.” Rather:

When a member desires to make a request not covered by one of the four types explained above—as, for example, a request to address remarks or make a presentation while no motion is pending—he rises, addresses the chair, and, as soon as he catches the presiding officer’s attention, states his request. Although he does not have to wait for recognition and can make his request even though another member has been assigned the floor, he should never interrupt a member speaking unless sure that urgency justifies it. Generally, such matters are settled by unanimous consent or informally, but if there is an objection, a motion can be made to grant the request. If explanation is required, it can be requested or given, but this must not extend into debate. These requests should be treated so as to interrupt the proceedings as little as is consistent with the demands of justice. RONR, p. 299.

There is a consequence of allowing a member who rises to a question of personal privilege to proceed without further explanation. It permits interruption of the proceedings, and the chair must determine whether the request is based on a pressing situation or if it is an unqualified demand to exercise a privilege that does not exist. Once such an unjustified privilege is permitted by the chair, other members quickly learn that they can stand and speak without recognition, permission, or time limit whenever the mood strikes them. Note that RONR prohibits the requested interruption from extending to debate and requires that the interruptions be permitted “as little as is consistent with the demands of justice.”
The phrase “demands of justice,” though undefined, appears to be a stringent test and a high bar, not met by unlimited expressions of personal feelings, the casting of aspersions, or discontent (what my Australian colleagues call “whinging”).

Point of Order

Though the presiding officer is primarily responsible for maintaining order and enforcing the rules, any member may interrupt the proceedings to raise a point of order when the member believes a rule of order or provisions of the organization’s Constitution and/or Bylaws is/are being violated. (RONR, p. 247) When that happens, the Chair must rule whether or not the Point of Order is well-taken. But a Point of Order itself is out of order if it is not being used to alert the Chair to a violation of the rules.

RONR provides this important warning:

“It is the duty of the presiding officer to prevent members from misusing the legitimate forms of motions, or abusing the privilege of renewing certain motions, merely to obstruct business. Whenever the chair becomes convinced that one or more members are repeatedly using parliamentary forms for dilatory purposes, he should either not recognize these members or he should rule that such motions are out of order- but he should never adopt such a course merely to speed up business, and he should never permit his personal feelings to affect his judgment in such cases. If the chair only suspects that a motion is not made in good faith, he should give the maker of the motion the benefit of the doubt. The chair should always be courteous and fair, but at the same time he should be firm in protecting the assembly from imposition.” (RONR, pp. 342-345)

The power and responsibility of the presiding officer to maintain order and enforce the rules while at the same time assuring members a safe and respectful environment that encourages civil debate requires that interruptions be moved properly and not for dilatory purposes.
Calling and pointing, as described above, must be seen as exceptions to the fundamental procedures of deliberation necessary for rational and civil discourse and decision-making. They are seeking to interrupt a speaker who has the floor or allow a member to speak without recognition. They are attempting to comment, advocate, or debate. The presiding officer must exercise due diligence to ensure that any exceptions or privileges are being used properly and only when there is an actual urgent and pressing need, consistent with the demands of justice.

GROUP EXERCISE

Which of the follow interruptions should be ruled out of order? If so, how could the speaker have made the motion properly?

1. Point of Order: I should be allowed to speak now since I know something about this issue that no one else knows.
2. Point of Information: I happen to know the fact alleged by the previous speaker is completely false.
3. Point of Personal Privilege: The minutes just approved incorrectly recorded my vote in the roll.
4. I call for a separate vote on resolution 21 that has been recommended and moved by the resolutions committee.
5. Point of Order: members in the back of the hall are playing video games.
6. I Call for the orders of the day: according to the agenda we should adjourn now.
7. Point of Personal Privilege: I demand the right to give an oral report for my committee at this time.
8. Point of Order: The speaker is lying!
9. Request for Information: What is the intent of this motion?
10. Request for Information: Does the speaker have any evidence to support the percentage of corruption alleged?

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1 Unless a speaker who has the floor yields to answer a member’s question, in which case the time consumed by the question is charged to the speaker (RONR p. 388,II. 18-20).