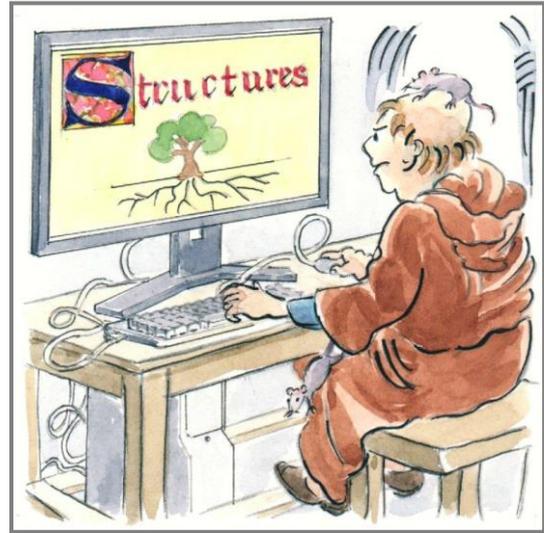


How to chair meetings

An orchestral approach

A5 Articles series: Structures



This article was first published on the website in September 2003 and last updated in May 2024. It is copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

This article has been prepared for all who would value practical help in chairing business meetings in a church or Christian mission agency. Applications include the Church Council (or equivalent), a general church meeting, a charity's Board, or any committees associated with such bodies.

In my work as a consultant I frequently come across emotional responses when I ask about business meetings in churches.

Sometimes it is fear. This is usually expressed by someone who is expected to chair a group but who has little training and who finds the experience a real ordeal. To some clergy faced with a hostile Church Council, Daniel's lions' den may appear an attractive alternative.

At other times the emotion can be frustration or even fury. This may come from busy people asked to serve on a body whose meetings go round the houses, wasting everyone's time, dealing with non-essentials, succumbing to hidden agendas and so achieving little.

The key to effective and enjoyable meetings lies so often in the quality of the chairing. It is not always an easy job. Getting the chairperson's job description clear is the first step (try Training Notes TN13 within

the Resources section of this website for some ideas here).

This article is concerned with some of the crucial skills anyone can learn. To take an unusual line, imagine you have been given a baton and asked to conduct a major symphony. Let's see where this illustration takes us. There are four main pieces of advice, each with a number of sub-points:

- 1 **Prepare the symphony**
or What you do beforehand
- 2 **Attend to the orchestra**
or How to work with your people
- 3 **Select the tempo**
or How to tackle the business
- 4 **Direct the players**
or When you need special help.

1: Prepare the symphony

Study the score

No conductor steps up onto the rostrum to conduct a new piece without having spent hours poring over the score. How should he or she tackle that tricky bit at the start of the second movement? What would be the right volume for the brass section at bar 36?

So with you. Your score is the agenda. You need to spend time studying it well in advance of the meeting. Where will people want special help? By what time will they be getting tired and need a break? Which items are going to be controversial, and how should you tackle them? Are there items when some of your 'soloists' will want to show the rest how it is done – how can you hold them back? Those who chair well have done their homework.

Gather the orchestra

Bruckner and Mozart symphonies need different kinds of orchestra. Most meetings may not cover these extremes, but you do need to consider whether you have the right instruments present and ready to play.

First, consider which voices in the group you need to hear on each item. These may not be those who naturally speak up. If you are discussing when the children should leave the service for their Sunday activities, you need to hear from that young mum who feels intimidated by the rest of the Council. Her children are in that group, so she knows what they are thinking. The conductor is going to have to bring her in at an appropriate moment.

Secondly, you may need to augment the orchestra for some items. You may need a few more mums and dads at this point – they might just come in for this item to help you see things from the children's perspective. You might even invite some children! Why not?

Rehearse the concert

No conductor will tackle a concert without proper rehearsal. For you there may be scope for researching views of people in advance. I was once on a Council where we put questionnaires out a month ahead, then analysed the findings in time to present them at the meeting.

It may be dangerous to seem to get alongside some and not others, but if you chair you need to

have put yourself in the shoes of different groups. When the Board talks about next year's big event, how will the staff react to yet more pressure? Do you need to help some see that not everyone will be as enthusiastic as they are on this item?

Set out the platform

Sometimes it takes time in the concert to rearrange the seating for the next piece. The layout really is important. So, in a meeting, one of the most important areas of preparation is to consider the layout of the room, and whether to change it during the business.

Seating layout must serve the purpose of each item. So a circle of chairs is good if you are doing some of that 'blue sky thinking' regarding new ways in which you might tackle outreach on the estate. If someone is making a presentation then an arc of chairs, so all can see the PowerPoint screen, will be better. If you want a formal meeting, a square of tables will be helpful. If you want a good argument, church choir stalls are excellent!

A meeting in someone's sitting-room, in comfortable chairs, will create a different atmosphere from the same people meeting in the dining-room, sitting in upright chairs around a table.

As you decide on a layout, consider who can see whom (or, more to the point, who cannot see whom). Ensure *you* can see everyone's face.

Watch carefully where individual people sit as they arrive. Some will tell a story, either by where they sit in relation to you or who they sit with. Some will look for a natural pulpit, others for a hiding place. Remember, the words spoken in a meeting are only one part of the communication taking place.

Check the recording

I admit I am stretching the analogy here as this is not the conductor's responsibility. But the person in the chair is responsible for ensuring that a proper recording is made, in two ways.

First, and most obviously, someone needs to take the minutes if it is that kind of meeting. Minutes record decisions made: they are not the same as Hansard which records every word that was spoken. They do not have to be too long.

Secondly, you need some kind of instant aid during most meetings to enable a statement to be worded correctly or to play around with some bullet-point ideas. A vital piece of apparatus for every meeting is a flip-chart or white-board. These may be humble pieces of low-tech

equipment but they have great value. Use one whenever it would be helpful. If there is any other equipment you need, get it there in advance. The person chairing finds a scribe. Never do it yourself as you have to turn your back to the meeting.

2: Attend to the orchestra

Tune the instruments

Ever listened to an out-of-tune orchestra, perhaps at a school concert? It's painful. Almost as painful as an out-of-tune group of people in a meeting – and that is much more common. So what is the equivalent of that 'A' note from the oboe?

The whole group needs to be sure of why it exists in the first place, and what it is trying to achieve at this meeting. Lack of clarity here makes playing in tune really hard. So, is the group clear on its overall purpose? Why does it meet? How does this group fit in with others? And for each item on the agenda, are you discussing it to obtain viewpoints, or so that you can make a decision here and now, or to give you information for something else you are doing later?

As an extra point Christians need to tune in to God's wavelength. The person chairing has a responsibility to help everyone come prepared to hear not only their own voice, nor even only those of others present, but also the voice of God. We look at this concept again towards the end of this piece but it deserves a complete article of its own.

Send clear messages

When the cellos take up the theme (I think I can hear some Brahms) the conductor doesn't switch off, or have a chat with the second violins. They'll be giving those cellos all their attention, making sure they are together in time, using facial expressions (think of Sir Simon Rattle) as well as baton movements to encourage them, or hush them up a bit, or whatever.

Some people chairing just sit back and do nothing while others are speaking. No wonder the meeting is a disaster! No. Give the speaker your whole attention (but see the next point too). Work this out in three main ways.

First, posture. Never slouch in the chair. Show you are alert, giving attention, listening keenly by sitting up and leaning slightly forwards.

Next, your face. Eyes on the speaker to show you are in charge of the meeting; face smiling encouragement and nodding if the speaker is a shy, nervous type who needs to be brought out, or impassive and questioning if that is the mood you need to convey.

Third, hands. They are very useful. If someone has spoken enough and needs to be brought to a close, it only needs a slight raising of the hand or a raised finger. Try all the possible rotations of the hand and fingers in front of a mirror to see the impact they can have. You can make powerful statements with very slight movements of your body.

Watch all sections

Just as the good symphonic conductor will never ignore the rest of the orchestra, neither should you. While doing all the above you are watching everyone else's body language. If people are bored, then it is time to draw this speaker to a close or change the dynamic of the meeting. If some are looking puzzled, you need to clarify what the speaker is saying. If they are looking excited, don't drop the current line of thought. If someone is looking angry or upset, you may need to ask them next: "Bill, you don't seem too happy with Rachel's suggestion. Am I right and, if so, why is that?"

You are also watching to see who wants to say something, and then deciding whether you want them to come in next or whether they have said more than enough already. So just as the orchestra sit round the conductor's rostrum in an arc, with raised platforms for larger groups so the timpani players at the back are as visible as the first violins in the front, so the person chairing needs to be in visible contact with everyone.

Repeat key themes

A symphony takes a number of tunes and plays around with them in all kinds of subtle (and not

so subtle) ways. After a number of variations the main theme may appear again to remind us where we started from. So don't be frightened of saying the same thing in different ways, and returning at the end to restate certain ideas or confirm decisions made.

Someone says something which you cannot follow. The chances are that others did not follow it either. It is your responsibility to get it clarified; it may be a brilliant point and the meeting needs to get it straight. So ask the speaker to say it again, or try to summarise it yourself in a simpler or clearer way and ask the original speaker if you have put it correctly. "As I understand it, Bill, I think you are saying that this proposal is well overdue. Have I summarised you correctly?"

Show no favouritism

The conductor who is always giving special attention to the brass section (because she was once a trumpet player herself) is hardly going to be respected as a good conductor. Neither will you be seen as a good person in the chair if you have your favourites in the meeting. Your role is to be impartial, enabling the meeting and not getting your own way.

There is a need to be known as being firm but fair. If the group gets a hint that whenever Craig speaks you back whatever he says, but when Darren comes in you always try to block him, beware. That would never be true for you, you say? I am not so sure. You need to ask others how you come across in this way.

3: Select the tempo

This is not an aspect of meetings that receives much attention but it is nonetheless important. Here are five pieces of advice.

Study the whole symphony

Under heading 1 I said you need to study the score. But that is not enough: a good conductor needs also to see this detail within the context of the whole piece. Just as a symphony has movements that are usually very different in nature, so any meeting will consist of sections that require different treatments.

For each agenda item the questions have to be, 'Why are we tackling this today?', and 'Where do we need to get to before we close?'. Everyone present needs to be aware of, and to agree, the answers to these. If you are chairing you are responsible for this, so you must be crystal clear yourself.

So the agenda states, baldly, 'Church weekend away'. You are in the chair and realise that this could go all over the place, especially if there are different views on the subject. So you decide that the item needs:

- a short discussion on the benefits of this event compared with the costs;
- a decision on whether to run another one and when;
- a listing of lessons learned last time so that any future weekend builds on this;
- if going ahead, the setting up of a small executive group to plan the weekend (plus the terms of reference).

At the close you are planning to achieve a clear decision on the future of this event and, if running another, the proposed date, the names of the people for the group, and the group's terms of reference. So there is going to be some discussion and then some clear decisions.

You can now plan how to take the item. It sounds embarrassingly obvious yet, if you do not set off with this clear aim and end point in view, the momentum of the meeting can quickly take you off on all kinds of unfocused directions and the pace goes out of the event.

Once the construction is clear you can now seek to

Choose the right speeds

A key function of any conductor is to choose the tempi. The composer has usually given a strong lead for this, but different conductors interpret a piece in different ways.

If you know what you are trying to do in any item, you can choose an appropriate speed. If you are good at chairing, you will make wise choices. So a listing on the flipchart of key points from earlier weekends (see above) can be clipped and fast so that people wake up and realise they have got to keep up with this. This will have implications for your tone of voice and posture at that point.

But the earlier discussion on whether to have another weekend or not may give rise to some serious points both for and against. You may need to take this more carefully so that no one feels that their view has been ignored. So, within one item, you are planning to take different sections at very different speeds. Just like a symphony!

A good meeting will usually have an edge to it, a certain shiver of excitement and purpose. I looked at the person chairing one meeting I was in to find him leaning back with his body in a straight line at 45 degrees to the ground while a speaker gave a presentation. This encouraged the whole meeting to slow down.

Keep the orchestra in time

A conductor needs a baton to keep the orchestra *in* time with his choice of tempo. With a meeting we take the issue of keeping everything *on* time.

Some agendas have no times by them. Others have a time by each individual item: 8.25 pm., 8.35 pm. 8.42 pm. and so on. Avoid both of these examples for most types of meeting. The first gives no guidelines, the second proclaims that the meeting has been pre-planned to the extent of being rigged. The person who chooses the times is in a position of power.

On the agenda paper have perhaps two fixed points. 'We aim to finish the meeting by 10.00 pm. at the latest'; and, against one of the items about half way through, 'We need to have reached this point by about 9.15 pm. if we are going to cover all the business.' But if you are chairing, mark *your* agenda with a suggested time against each item, provided you keep this to yourself. This simply means that if the meeting is running late, you know you must speed things up or drop some items.

Have a list of items you will propose dropping if time is running out and some things have to go. Better this than ignoring an item that needs an urgent decision (although why is this coming late in the meeting?), or one that involves someone who has joined the group for that one meeting.

If you are good at chairing you will be aiming to finish the meeting on time, with all the business covered, without anyone feeling you rushed things past them unfairly. And, yes, it is not easy!

Avoid conducting from the keyboard

Some performers have the ability to be a virtuoso soloist as well as a conductor. And some pieces

can be conducted from the piano or violin. But don't try this in your meetings.

What do I mean? I am sure you have served under such people in the chair: they start by giving a long solo introduction to the piece, then bring in one or two instruments for a bit, but quickly revert to another long solo section. It may look clever, but this is no way to lead most types of meeting.

Advice to those in the chair: apart from any necessary introduction, try never to talk for more than a minute at a time. Instead, come in frequently but very briefly. You may summarise an argument, ask for clarification, give a lead, remind the meeting where you are trying to go, or pull the discussion back onto the subject. But never do this at length or you are conducting from the keyboard.

"That's great, Mary. So we are all agreed that we should run another church weekend in 2023 but feel that May or June might be better than the crowded autumn. OK? Good. Let's now have no more than five minutes to list on the flipchart some lessons we need to learn from the last two weekends. We'll then set up a planning group and decide on the exact date. So, some quick suggestions on lessons to learn and Tim will scribe for us."

The good chairperson now shuts up.

Judge the concluding speed

Some pieces of music are marked that the speed should slow down as the final chord is reached to emphasise the conclusion. Some conductors may choose to do this anyway. But there are other pieces that would be ruined if this happened. This shows the need to judge the speed as you approach the end of each item.

Some meetings slow up as you get to the end. This is normally because midnight has already chimed and most people's brains went into 'sleep' mode an hour earlier, or because everyone has now been sitting for two and a half hours without a break and God never designed the human body for such torture. Make sure you never experience such things when you are chairing.

If you are chairing you need first to close each item at the right moment. But there is also the point about closing at the right speed. I've often been in meetings when we have closed an item after it ran out of steam and was getting nowhere. Items normally need to end with a flourish: the thrill of turning a discussion into a crisp decision and a clear action plan. My advice would be, speed up at the end!

4: Direct the players

Learn from the greatest conductor of all

Good conductors will have studied the maestros with great care. I have so far made only one reference to the spiritual resources available to every Christian gathering.

As the person chairing it is your duty to note when the whole meeting needs external help. Too many so-called Christian meetings have what I term a 'nod to God' approach. They start with a prayer, then in effect thank the Lord Jesus for his presence but ask if he would mind waiting outside during the business items. He might be invited back right at the end for the Grace.

And yet I have seen some meetings take an approach that I can term nothing other than spiritual blackmail. Someone puts their view and then suggests a time of prayer to avoid others speaking, or people are frightened of disagreement and so spiritualise the issue in some way.

The times when you need to pray (in whatever form suits those present) are at the start of the meeting, as you approach a major decision, and whenever the discussion gets tangled up and you need clarity.

How the meeting incorporates prayer, silence and Bible input into its meetings will say much about the whole purpose of the group. It is the chairperson's job to get the balance right.

Draw in those who aren't playing

I have served on a number of groups that have included people who have said virtually nothing during meetings throughout a whole year. Sometimes such people make their views unhelpfully clear to others in different settings, whether in the car park as the meeting breaks up or days later behind closed doors. But usually they are loyal people, often with much wisdom to offer, who find the setting of a formal meeting intimidating or who feel they have little to contribute.

If you are in the chair, it is your responsibility to draw out what such people have to offer. You cannot blame them for not playing their instrument if the conductor has failed to bring them in at the right time and in an appropriate way. Here are some ideas to consider.

a. Prepare in advance

Know where they might have a valuable contribution to make and draw them in gently at that point. "Stuart, you were telling me the other day how your home group finds the present material difficult to follow. Do you think this new idea would be an improvement?"

b. Break the meeting into small groups

Those who are intimidated by a group of 15 will often be happy to take a full part in a group of three or four. So, during a discussion, break into small groups for ten minutes and then encourage quick feed-back from each group.

c. Write ideas down

Quieter people often find it easier to read something out than to speak without notes.

- If you know Zoe has a valuable contribution to make, ask her to write it out beforehand and then lead her in.
- Give everyone post-it notes, ask them to express their views in brief, note form and then encourage them to take them to the flip-chart and stick them on. This can be anonymous, with the leader then reading out all the contributions.

d. Go round the circle

Sometimes it can be valuable to ask everyone to give their viewpoint one by one with no interruption allowed. This can be a bit frightening for some, but does mean that everyone speaks. Never place quieter people on the spot.

e. Thank and encourage

If Felicity is a fearful soul but has just managed to say something which you then ignore, it is hardly surprising that she returns to silence. She feels very exposed. So make a point of thanking her warmly, and making a suitable comment to show that her idea was a helpful contribution to the debate. (See below if it was not!)

If you are in the chair, you may be so focused on the process of the meeting itself that you forget to draw out everyone's contribution and so ensure the meeting functions well.

Control the wannabe soloists

But not everyone is silent! In our orchestral picture you will doubtless have one or two people who feel that this should be a concerto, not a symphony, with them as the virtuoso soloist.

The first point to note is that every effort to draw in quieter people will stop the over-talkative from saying too much. Everything already listed also applies under this heading, and *vice versa*. But here are some specific ideas to quieten those who speak too much.

a. Interrupt when necessary

Be ready to break in. Earlier I talked about the need for the right posture and hand movements. These are vital if you are to interrupt successfully. When you can get a word in edgeways, phrases to consider include:

- “Vijay, that’s great but what exactly is the point you are making?”
- “Steph, can we now draw in one or two of those who have not yet spoken?”
- “Thank you Chris, that’s one perspective on the issue so let’s see if we can collect two or three others”

Do it with a smile and they can hardly complain.

b. Agree some principles of debate

Some simple, informal principles (as opposed to rules) of debate can be helpful. Agree them at the start of the year. You can decide, for example, that in a discussion you want contributions from as many people as possible. Or that there will be respect for differing viewpoints and a real effort by all to understand other people’s points of view.

Very few groups discuss and agree on the process of how they are going to work together. If you do get broad agreement for such principles, the person chairing can then appeal to them when someone is clearly failing to listen to other speakers or trying to say too much.

c. Have a word outside the meeting

If there is someone who is regularly trying to say too much, take action outside the meeting. A word one-to-one in confidence may well have greater effect than any attempt at what may be regarded as public humiliation in the meeting itself.

If the person in the chair is clearly in control of the meeting, is acting fairly, and is keeping the discussion on topic and to time, most people will back any means to ensure that those with much

to say are, with charm, prevented from taking the floor too much.

Retune those who go off key

Some people, both quiet and loud, make points that do not take the meeting forward. They may repeat something already agreed, they may have a one-issue agenda and skilfully turn every topic to this, they may simply be completely off the point.

How you tackle such situations demonstrates your skill, or lack of it, in the chair. If you are too laid back, you will accept all such contributions while the meeting goes nowhere and others become frustrated. If you are too tense, you may appear tetchy and take the meeting over yourself. The key is to get to a position where you are confident in your role, firm in your approach and charming in your manner.

The key is to have a clear idea of where the discussion should be leading. Here are some phrases that might be useful.

- “So, the point you are making is?”
- “Which part of the paper are you applying this to?”
- “Thank you. Now, just to remind us all, the three possible ways forward we are addressing are ...”
- “I am not prepared to tackle that issue today since the agenda clearly states that ...”

Some of these appear more direct than others, although different tones of voice and facial expressions allow a wide variation in each of them. But the approach if a quieter member is wandering off the point should be different from that employed when a regular concerto-player is starting an out-of-tune solo once again.

Consider whether you are the right conductor

Finally, having looked at others in the meeting, a word to those in the chair. Are you sitting in the right place?

Chairing a meeting is not an easy job. It calls for certain skills as will have become apparent from this feature. The role of enabling a meeting, whether Christian or not, to achieve its purpose and decide together on a way forward implies an ability to distance oneself from firmly held opinions.

Sometimes the person who is the natural leader should not chair the meetings. A typical example is the Vicar of an Anglican parish chairing the Parochial Church Council.

When it comes to items that Vicars feel (and should feel) passionate about, they may find themselves with split loyalties. On the one hand they want to persuade the Council of the way forward they believe to be right (for example, over an issue to do with worship), but on the other they are seeking to enable a meeting to come to a view as a body.

You need to distinguish the roles of leadership of a group from the chairing of the group's meetings. They are different and, although they can be combined in one person, they can just as well be split. The Vicar should lead the PCC team. He or she can then hand over the chairing of meetings (or parts of meetings) to someone else. The rules say that the Vicar is the ex-officio

chairperson. But that does not preclude him or her voluntarily handing the chair over.

My own experience is that you can have much more impact on individual issues if you are not in the chair. If there is someone in the group who has the necessary skills for this role and who shares the values of the group (including the Christian values where this applies), let them chair the meetings and let the leader then say his or her piece with passion and within the discipline that the meeting requires.

But, whoever chairs, it is never an easy role (do you pray for the person chairing?). It is a crucial one though, and can be a thoroughly satisfying role to play.

In our churches and mission agencies let's find gifted people who can chair, then train them and support them. Then we can all minimise our frustrations and enjoy our meetings!

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A5. For a sample purpose statement on this same idea see Training Notes TN13, *A purpose statement for those who chair*, and for some forthright advice on meetings in general study Article A24, *Mission-shaped Church Councils*. See also Training Notes TN61, *Mapping out a meeting*, TN71, *Seatings for meetings*, TN88, *Advice to a new committee member*, TN97, *How to minute a meeting*, TN118, *Why, exactly, are we meeting?* and TN141, *A church council Code of Conduct*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A5 under Structures (with a link to Planning).

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325

Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk

Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>