



# ON BOARD

A resource for not-for-profit board members

## What Is a Motion and Who Can Make One?

By Ann G. Macfarlane, Professional Registered Parliamentarian

Many board members understand how motions work in practice, but might be hard put to define them. A motion is simply a proposal for action. A member of the board or group introduces her motion by saying, “I move that ...” That’s all it takes.

Most new ideas are introduced for consideration by a motion. The member obtains recognition from the presider (the president, chair, or person running the meeting). Given permission to speak, he states his motion. If another member is interested in discussing the motion, he says “second.” The presider then states the motion, and discussion can begin.

Members have surprising latitude to propose motions under Robert’s Rules. Motions can be introduced only when no other business is pending, and in accord with an adopted agenda if there is one, but anybody can propose that the group take action. It’s not some special privilege reserved to the chair, for instance, as one group mistakenly thought.

I served as a public member on a state commission for a couple of years. When my term was over, another member commented that my willingness to speak up and say “I move that we do such and so” significantly improved the group’s work output. The body had a habit of studying issues at length. They were quite comfortable asking for more information, or postponing a topic until the next quarter’s meeting. This tendency might have been because half the members were judges, well versed in continuing cases, or it might have been the natural inertia that drags at public bodies. When you’re likely to take flak no matter which way you jump, it’s harder to make decisions.

We suggest that the etymology of the word “motion” can be a good reminder here. “Motion” comes from the past participle of “movere,” the Latin verb meaning “to move.” A motion is a proposal to move forward. Movement is necessary if we are going to prosper, in our organizations as in our lives.

### ***About the Author***

Ann G. Macfarlane makes meeting procedure interesting, relevant and practical for board members. Through her company, Jurassic Parliament, she distills the essence of Robert’s Rules of Order and shows how to run fair and efficient meetings. She blogs regularly at [www.jurassicparliament.com](http://www.jurassicparliament.com) and is the author of [\*Mastering Council Meetings\*](#).

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