What’s your agenda? When we say a person “has an agenda” it usually indicates selfish motives and is seldom a compliment. But a meeting that has no agenda indicates disarray and a likely bad experience. In twenty years of doing training sessions, the number one complaint expressed by members and directors is that the chair doesn’t follow the agenda – that the meeting doesn’t stay on track.

There is some confusion among three terms: program, order of business, and agenda. A program generally refers to a multi-day series of meetings and events such as a convention or conference. It tells when things will happen and where, and a business meeting might be a small part of the program. The order of business is the list of general topics to be discussed in the meeting. Common headings under an order of business include new business, committee reports, or general orders.

An agenda is a planned order to take up business at a meeting, listing not just the headings but the specific items of business to be handled. For example, the heading might be committee reports, but items underneath that heading could include the bylaws committee report with proposed amendments listed.

The agenda should always be sent out in advance. The members need this information to prepare themselves to consider the issues that will come up in the meeting. Even though the agenda has been sent out, it is good practice to adopt the agenda at the beginning of the meeting. This is often handled by general consent. The chair can say: “If there is no objection, we will follow the agenda as distributed.” Here is where the difference between board and membership meetings can be a significant factor. If the meeting is a regular monthly meeting of the membership, agendas are generally more fluid and might contain a category called new business, where motions can be made with no previous notice. This works best for local meetings, but the board of directors of a national nonprofit organization, meeting far less frequently and traveling great distances to participate cannot function that way. Such boards should have a rule setting deadlines for submitting agenda items and allow late-surfacing surprises only with a two-thirds vote to suspend the rule.

Beware of putting times on the agenda; those times become rules unless the agenda includes a notice that times are approximate. Otherwise, the adoption of the agenda creates special orders, meaning that at the designated time that agenda item automatically comes up, interrupting whatever business was on the floor at the time. This is called a special order, which is usually set by a two-thirds vote, but if adopted as part of a timed agenda only requires a majority vote.

The agenda belongs to the members, not the chair. Once adopted, the agenda can be amended by a two-thirds vote, but is usually done by general consent. A motion to allow the chair to change the agenda as necessary is a waste of time. Either adopt the agenda and be ready to give reasonable permission for changes, or adopt a rule giving the chair full power over the agenda, something that is definitely not recommended. The agenda is the collaborative decision about what items of business will be taken up at a meeting – and in what order.