



What's a Snippet? Glad you asked! A Snippet is short article about meetings or parliamentary procedure. New snippets are released on the first day of every month at www.agreatmeeting.com.



Snippet #179 Questions of Privilege

The term “questions of privilege” conjures up all sorts of opulent thoughts. It certainly sounds like the fundamental principles of equality do not operate with this motion. Who claims this privilege, and what is their question?

Question of Privilege is the name of a motion – a tool that a member can use to do all sorts of things. You’ve probably used it many times without knowing specifically what it is or how to use it. Have you ever had a problem hearing a speaker and interrupted to ask her to speak louder? You’ve actually raised your very own question of privilege. A question of privilege is the motion used to bring an urgent matter to the attention of the chair, such as excessive noise or poor lighting. I’ve also referred to it as the “Goldilocks motion” – for when it’s too hot or too cold. The chair rules whether the matter is truly urgent enough to deal with immediately or if it can wait.

George Demeter, an author of a parliamentary book in the 1960’s, had an acronym for questions of privilege: SHIP. SHIP stands for **s**afety, **h**ealth, **i**ntegrity, and **p**rotection of **p**roperty. It’s an easy way to remember when to use of question of privilege correctly.

One of the most common uses of a question of privilege involves the integrity of the assembly – a motion to go into executive session. Confidential matters must always be held in executive session, and the executive session can also be established as an item on the agenda. At that point in the meeting there is no motion necessary to go into executive session, that decision was made when the agenda was adopted.

At any time during a meeting, if the debate gets into confidential or touchy territory, any member can interrupt with a question of privilege that this debate should be held in executive session. In fact, Robert’s Rules goes so far as to say that a motion to go into executive session *is* a question of privilege, which is a bit confusing. What it actually seems to mean is that any time the motion to go into executive session is made, its very nature indicates urgency and should be handled immediately.

A phrase that seems to be common is a “point of personal privilege.” This occurs if a member wants to interrupt the proceedings for a matter that applies to him only and not to the rest of the assembly. For example, if a vote is being taken by rising and a member finds it difficult to stand, a point of personal privilege may be raised to seek permission to remain seated and raise a hand. Or, a guest may request the privilege to enter a closed area for delegates or to sit at the board table to speak to the assembly. The chair would first rule on whether the point of personal privilege is one that must be taken up immediately (hint to the chair: yes it is in this case) and follow it by remedial action (stop taking rising votes or announce that those who find standing difficult may raise their hand).

Another occasion when a point of personal privilege might be used is at the end of a meeting. This is not used in the traditional sense, to bring up matters for the chair to determine urgency, but a time when members may make personal remarks of appreciation or observations about the state of the association.

Members need to bear in mind that a situation must truly need immediate attention to interrupt with a question of privilege. If it can comfortably wait until a break in the proceedings it is better handled then. Chairs should understand that just because something is raised as a question of privilege doesn’t mean it must be handled immediately. First, the chair must rule on whether it is a truly urgent situation. There is no obligation on the part of the chair to take up a question of privilege immediately. It’s a matter of judgement.