

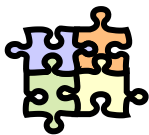
YOU'RE ON BOARD!

A short guide for people with disabilities who are on agency boards and committees

by Amy Walker, Illinois Voices Systems Change Activist



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**Illinois Voices: Putting together the pieces of the
self-advocacy puzzle.**

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First of All—CONGRATULATIONS!



Congratulations on being chosen to serve on one of your agency’s boards, committees, or even Board of Directors! You’re going to help make important decisions that might change your life and the lives of everyone at the agency. Not everyone gets a chance to do this, so think of yourself as important. In fact, you are one of the most important people on the board! Don’t let yourself or anyone else forgets it. Speak up and be proud!

I was on the Board of Directors for my hometown’s local Arc agency (agency for people with disabilities), so I’ve “been there and done that”. I’d like to share 10 meeting rules:

Rule #1: Get ready for and talk about the Board Meeting ahead of time.



When I served on the Board of Directors at my hometown Arc agency, I found out that board meetings were like tests I took at school. The more that I “studied” ahead of time, or talked about it with someone else and read the handouts, the more ready I was for the meeting. You can “get ready ahead of time” like I did! Here are some tips:

- Talk with someone else who will be at the meeting. You might ask them:
 - “What is this meeting about? What are we going to talk about?”
 - “Are there any pieces of paper, or handouts, that I should read?”
 - “On what day and time is the meeting, and where will it be?”
- Read the handouts, or any pieces of paper that show what will be talked about.
 - At board meetings, people might ask you to follow along with the handouts. If you know what the handouts say ahead of time, so much the better for you!
 - If you don’t understand the handouts, PLEASE ASK someone to explain them and go over them with you. That might make handouts easier to understand.

- Ask about break time, where the restrooms are, etc. before the meeting starts. Usually, the leader of the meeting, often called a *chair* or *chairperson*, will do this, but if not, please ask him or her about these things before the meeting.

Now that we know how to get ready for a meeting, what do we do once it starts?

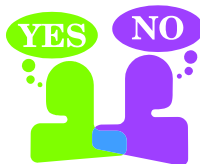
Rule #2: Remember that you are IMPORTANT and your opinions MATTER.



When I was at Arc meetings, many times I felt like I wasn't an important person there. I wasn't "staff" at the agency and didn't get paid to work with anyone, so how would I know what was going on at the meeting? I told my friend Lou Ellen this, and she said that I was the most important person there! Why? Because I had a developmental disability. How could the rest of the people at the meeting make the right decisions about what they should do to support people like us *without us*? They wouldn't get to hear the real story from people that might be using services!

Remember **YOU ARE IMPORTANT** and **YOUR OPINIONS MATTER.** Now for...

Rule #3: Speak up and be proud, even if you disagree with some ideas.



When you know that you are important and your opinions matter to others, you may want to speak up at the meeting and let the other members of the board or committees know what you think! Speak up and be proud. Even if you don't agree with some of the ideas other people bring up, DON'T keep your mouth shut. Tell people how you feel, but do it the RIGHT way and not the WRONG way, like so:

WRONG WAY

"That's a dumb idea!"

"I've got a better idea than you do."

"That's impossible."

"You don't know anything!"

"Okay, Bigshot, bring it on!"

RIGHT WAY

"That idea might not work."

"I've got a good idea, too."

"Maybe we could try this..."

"How did you come up with that idea?"

"Let's try your idea to see if it works."

Whenever you disagree with someone's ideas, DON'T call that person names or put them down! Instead, try to work WITH them to come up with some new ideas, or find a way to work together so that some parts of both of your ideas can work.

Now that you're at the meeting, feeling proud, and speaking up, suddenly you get lost in a big fog of words! You don't understand what's going on! What do you do?

Rule #4: If you don't understand something, PLEASE ASK for help.



This was hard for me to do. At the Arc meetings, I wanted to be "cool" and understand everything that was going on. When I couldn't, I didn't want to ask for help because I didn't want to look silly in front of everyone else. However, when I DID ask for help, all the people at the meeting were happy to explain what they were talking about when I didn't understand. So PLEASE ask for help if you "get lost" at the meeting. That way, you'll look smart because people will know that you care about what they're saying! If you understand what's going on at the meeting, then you can speak up in a better and more meaningful way, like in Rule #5:

Rule #5: Do You Have or Support an Idea? "Move It" or "Second It"!



Meetings at your agency are all about hearing ideas and making action plans to get things done. Let's say you have an idea that your agency should spend some extra money to install a ramp for wheelchairs at their office building. You might say:

"I *move* (have an idea) that our agency should spend extra money to install a ramp for wheelchairs at this office building."

Saying "I move" makes your idea official so that everyone can hear it and think about it. Once you do, then your idea is called a *motion*. People can vote on it. The head person at the meeting, or *chair*, will ask if the other members of the board or committee support it, saying "AYE!", or are against it, saying "NAY!" Depending on how many people say "AYE" or "NAY", the idea may be put into place or denied.

Let's say that someone else on the board at the meeting comes up with an idea that you like. For example, let's say someone says, "I move (have an idea) that our agency should rewrite its rules to make them easier for everyone to understand."

If you like this, you can say, "I *second* it" or "I *second* that motion (official idea)."

Every *motion*, or official idea, has to be said to the group, or *moved*. It also has to have two people agree with it (the person who came up with the idea and one other person). This is called having the motion *seconded*. Only then can others vote on it.

Don't be afraid to "move" or "second" an idea if you like it. Use your voice! Be bold.

The next 5 rules are questions you should ask yourself and others at the meeting.

Rule #6: Ask, "How will this idea, if we do it, affect people served?"



In my opinion, this is **THE #1 QUESTION** you should ask about an idea. You can ask it to yourself first and think about it, and then it's best if you ask others that, too. After all, people served are the most important people at any agency. The money that they get from the government for their services pays all of the agency staff!

Here are some possible agency ideas that will DEFINITELY affect people served:

- Building ramps and making other changes to make the agency more accessible
- Rewriting agency rules that will make them easier to understand
- Changing the rules that decide whether people get agency services or not
- Deciding whether or not to build new group homes, workshops, and so on
- Deciding whether or not people served can have pets or animals at the agency
- Deciding whether or not to cut back on agency money to give people services

Rule #7: Ask, "How will this idea, if we do it, affect everyone else?"

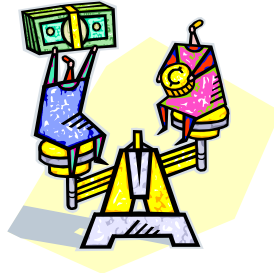


After you know how an idea might change or affect the lives of people served, ask how this idea will affect or change the lives of everyone else at the agency. These two questions are ones you should ask for every idea that comes up, because at an agency, everyone is connected to everyone else, and one change for one person might cause another change for another person. Here are some examples:

- Agency staff get paid more, and then more new staff members get hired
- Agency staff get paid less, and so more staff members leave their jobs
- The agency builds a new "recreation center"; people served and staff enjoy it
- The agency makes stricter rules on who can get services; less people come
- The agency budget is tight and some cutbacks have to be made

After you ask these two questions about ideas or suggestions that come up, it's time to follow Rule #8. Rule #8 is also a very important question, as are Rules #9 and #10.

Rule #8: Ask, "What is the 'flip side' of the idea that I like or support?"



When coming up with and supporting new ideas at board meetings, it's very important to ask this question. There's an old saying, "Every coin has two sides," and every story has at least two. Here are some examples of ideas and their "flip side", or other side.

IDEA

"FLIP SIDE" OF THAT IDEA

"Let's pay staff more."

"Our agency won't make as much money."

"Let's build a wheelchair ramp."

"That will cost the agency some money."

"Let's allow pets in group homes."

"Who will pay for damage pets might cause?"

"Let's hire more staff to work here."

"Do we have enough money to pay them?"

"Let's get rid of this silly rule."

"Would doing that help or hurt people?"

If you think about both sides, or the many sides, of any idea you support and bring them up, then you will help to make a better decision than if you just said, "Let's do this" or "Let's put this idea into place" without thinking about all the "sides" of the idea.

Rule #9: Ask, "Will putting this idea into place be fair to everyone?"



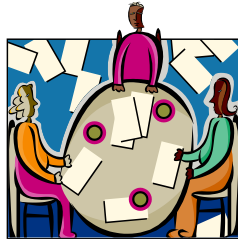
This is always a hard question to answer, but we must ask it. When agencies do things, they want to make sure that everyone at that agency thinks it's fair and will benefit. For example, allowing pets in group homes may be fair to people who want pets, but for people who are allergic to them, it may not be fair. Another example is when a staff member is about to be fired because of a "No swearing" rule at a workshop. If the staff member does his or her job well and cares about the people he or she supports, and if he or she did not mean to cuss in a mean way, then maybe that person should not be fired after all, but rather "written up" and given a second chance instead. Deciding whether ideas brought up at board meetings will be fair to everyone is a hard thing to do. After all, not everyone at the agency is there at the meeting! How do we decide? Here are 5 questions that agencies might ask themselves about whether ideas are fair:

- Will people served, staff, and everyone at the agency be better off if we do this?
- Will this idea cost some people a lot of time and money, and other people none?
- If we are using taxpayer money to do this idea, how will we spend it carefully?
- Do we have enough staff, time, and resources to make this idea really work?
- Will anyone be hurt, either personally or financially, if we do this idea?

If an idea is fair to everyone or almost everyone, it has a better chance of being put into place. Would this idea be fair to you? What about the other people around you?

This last question, Rule #10, is also one of the most important questions to ask:

Rule #10: Ask, "What can I do on this board to help make things better?"



Speaking up at board and committee meetings is great, and it's even better if people take action because of what was talked about at those meetings. Ask what you can do to help put some good ideas into place. Here are some examples of what you can do:

- Ask if you can send people letters about a new idea, such as a staff pay raise
- Ask if you can raise funds for new buildings or services if they're proposed
- Ask how you can contact your state officials for more agency money if needed
- Ask if you can become an officer of the Board (maybe after a couple years!)
- Ask if you can give a survey to everyone at the agency to hear what they think
- Ask if you can see the agency's budget and have it explained to you
- Ask to see the rules and regulations that you have to follow and learn them
- Ask if you can talk about some ideas and issues with your friends and staff

Rule #10 is all about action, and here's hoping the good ideas your board has will be put into place with your help! Remember, the agency is here to help YOU, and through helping the agency, it can help you in a better way. Let everyone know what you think!

Down below, I've listed these 10 rules for you to use as a quick "cheat sheet"!

Good luck and congratulations on being chosen for this important, high responsibility!

Top 10 Rules for Board Meetings

- #1: Get ready for and talk about the Board Meeting ahead of time.**
- #2: Remember that you are IMPORTANT and your opinions MATTER.**
- #3: Speak up and be proud, even if you disagree with some ideas.**
- #4: If you don't understand something, PLEASE ASK for help.**
- #5: Do You Have or Support an Idea? "Move It" or "Second It"!**
- #6: Ask, "How will this idea, if we do it, affect people served?"**
- #7: Ask, "How will this idea, if we do it, affect everyone else?"**
- #8: Ask, "What is the 'flip side' of the idea that I like or support?"**
- #9: Ask, "Will putting this idea into place be fair to everyone?"**
- #10: Ask, "What can I do on this board to help make things better?"**



GOOD LUCK AND HAPPY MEETINGS!