

I don't simply read books. I devour them, with pen in my hand, highlighting and making notes. After reading, I copy down all the notes and type them up, considering each idea all over again. Yet, I have often found that key learnings are too quickly gone from memory. That's why I started compiling these two-page book reviews for personal use. With the encouragement of friends and colleagues, I offer my notes now through the Creative Option C website so that others may gain the insight of these authors and perhaps be inspired to read the entire work.

TITLE:	<u>Breaking Robert's Rules: The New Way to Run Your Meeting, Build Consensus, and Get Results</u>
AUTHOR:	Lawrence E. Susskind and Jeffrey L. Cruikshank, Consensus Building Institute
PUBLICATION:	Oxford University Press, 2006

PRIMARY THEME: Robert's Rules of Order, aka "Parliamentary Procedures," were written in the 19th Century in order to govern large public meetings. They are neither appropriate nor productive for today's boards, committees, or other decision-making bodies. More effective is the Consensus Building Approach (CBA), a process which has its own rules, guidelines, and procedures.

SUMMARY DISCUSSION: After proving the inadequacy of Robert's Rules and its variations as decision-making processes, the book gives a soup-to-nuts explanation for how to design a consensus-building process. From convincing others to try it, to gathering the right stakeholders to the table, to keeping communication flowing, to holding people accountable, the book provides step-by-step guidance from experienced facilitators for those ready to strengthen their facilitative leadership skills and help their groups and organizations achieve their highest potential in collaboration with others.

CHAPTERS:

Part 1: Overcoming the Tyranny of the Majority and Other Problems Associated with Robert's Rules of Order

- Chapter 1: Why Break Robert's Rules? Though few know what the rules contain or how to use them, many groups and organizations still have bylaws that call for the use of Robert's Rules. This leaves groups vulnerable to manipulation by those who have studied them. Because the rules contain procedures for silencing minority views, their use can also cause delays in implementation of projects as disaffected minorities find ways to block progress on decisions they oppose.
- Chapter 2: What is Consensus? General agreement among group members having equal access to the decision-making process is a better definition for consensus than absolute unanimity. In CBA, all participants are informed about the decisions before them and are encouraged to work on mutually-acceptable solutions. The six foundations of CBA are: 1) clarifying responsibilities, 2) clarifying the group's mission, 3) conducting joint fact-finding, 4) working toward agreements that leave everyone better off, 5) drafting agreements for review by the participants' constituencies, and 6) thinking ahead about implementation challenges.
- Chapter 3: Getting the Right People to the Table. Making sure to have representation from all stakeholders is key to the long-term success of any project. Another key is performing an assessment, including understanding the views of a variety of stakeholders. The assessment, which should be performed by an outsider, is used to create a project work plan.

- Chapter 4: Assigning Tasks and Leadership Responsibilities. A consensus-building process involves people assuming a variety of roles, including those of facilitator, process manager, and recorder. Leadership in a CBA context requires different skills than in a majority-rules or power-centered process.
- Chapter 5: The Importance of Facilitation. In CBA, the facilitator and convener must continuously encourage people to be open to a new way of doing things, including taking the time to build or rebuild trust among group members. The eight commitments involved in a CBA process are outlined. The facilitator takes responsibility for the process, leaving others to participate fully in the content of decision-making.
- Chapter 6: Confirming That Agreement Has Been Reached. In this chapter, the authors outline three techniques for getting to a fair solution that will yield unanimous or “overwhelming agreement”: 1) Maximizing Joint Gains, 2) Keeping the Record Straight, and 3) Anticipating the Problems of Follow Through.
- Chapter 7: Crafting “Nearly Self-Enforcing Agreements.” When an agreement package is put together in such a way that all involved would rather see it succeed than fail, then it is much easier to implement. It is in the execution phase that groups receive the pay-off for taking time to get all of the stakeholders in alignment at the beginning of the project. The project ends when the last person does the last task outlined in the agreement.
- Chapter 8: Overcoming the Barriers to CBA. Though it is easier, less costly, and more effective, proponents of CBA still encounter obstacles – both internally and externally. People unfamiliar with the process often feel the anxiety of change, as well as uneasiness about the initially slow pace. Strategies for overcoming resistance are outlined here as well as in the appendix.

Part 2: The Five Essential Steps in the Consensus Building Approach. The attached table provides a summary.

Step 1: Convening.

Step 2: Assigning Roles and Responsibilities.

Step 3: Facilitating Group Problem Solving.

Step 4: Reaching Agreement.

Step 5: Holding Parties to Their Commitments.

TOOLS: Six appendices to the book include:

- A checklist on “convincing others to use the Consensus Building Approach,”
- A set of draft ground rules for meetings,
- Instructions for facilitators,
- A one-page guide to the five steps, and
- A bibliography of further readings in consensus building and related topics.

KEY TAKEAWAYS: “[A] major difference between consensus and majority rule: people engaging in CBA have a positive obligation to improve the package that is put on the table, if they don’t like it. The disaffected person doesn’t have the luxury of just sitting around being disaffected. If that person is unhappy, then he or she has to come up with proposal modifications that will make the package go from unacceptable to acceptable – not just for them but for everyone in the group.” (p. 31-32)

“Facilitative leadership is not the same thing as ‘being nice,’ or even ‘being fair.’ Instead, it’s all about keeping one’s eye on the prize, and that means getting to an agreement that is seen by all parties as fair, efficient, and wise. If it is seen as having these attributes, it will also be durable, which is the final characteristic of a good solution. (A fair, wise, and efficient solution will stick.)” (p. 81)

“People participate constructively in consensus-building by **giving reasons**. What does this mean? Participants have to learn to distinguish between their **positions** and their **interests**. ... There are two compelling arguments for this: 1) it forces each individual to figure out exactly what is and isn’t important to them, and 2) it enables the group to understand each individual’s interests and why they are perceived as important, opening the door to other mutually advantageous solutions.” (p. 87)

THE FIVE ESSENTIAL STEPS IN THE CONSENSUS BUILDING PROCESS

The objective of CBA is to seek unanimity on a written package that offers all stakeholders something more valuable than what they can expect in the absence of an agreement.

Adapted from *Breaking Roberts Rules: The New Way to Run Your Meeting, Build Consensus and Get Results*

By Lawrence E. Susskind and Jeffrey L. Cruikshank

Step 1: Convening

1.1	<i>Initiate discussion with potential organizer(s)</i>	Formal authority to take action. ...Give the potential convener a copy of <i>Breaking Robert's Rules</i> .
1.2	<i>Initiate an assessment.</i>	Seek help from a professional neutral... interview the obvious stakeholders privately and confidentially... write a short synopsis "mapping the conflict"... short summary and one-page matrix and sent to all interviewees.
1.3	<i>Use the assessment to identify appropriate stakeholder representatives.</i>	The assessment should help the assessor spell out for the convener who to invite to the table.
1.4	<i>Finalize commitments to involve appropriate stakeholder representatives if a consensus-building process goes forward.</i>	The assessor should formulate a potential agenda, work plan, timetable, and budget, and suggest ground rules... draft sent to all stakeholders... and asked directly whether they would participate in CBA.
1.5	<i>Decide whether to commit to CBA</i>	If the assessor believes that the most important stakeholders will participate (at least in organizational session) and that there is a possibility of finding common ground, then tell the convener.
1.6	<i>Make sure that those in positions of authority agree to the process</i>	At organizational meeting, the parties make their own decision about whether to go forward, who the facilitator should be, and whether to accept or modify the agenda, ground rules, timetable, budget, and invitation list.

Step 2: Assigning Roles and Responsibilities

2.1	<i>Specify who will take responsibility for convening, facilitating, recording, moderating or chairing meetings, representing key stakeholder groups, and providing expert advice.</i>	At the first meeting, the group as a whole reviews its roles and responsibilities... In small groups, it is possible to handle the assignment of duties in a less formal way.
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2.2	<i>Set rules regarding the involvement of alternates and observers</i>	It is important for each CBA group to set clear ground rules regarding which, if any, of its sessions will be open to observers and whether or not observers will be recognized to speak.
2.3	<i>Finalize the agenda, ground rules, work plan, and budget in written form (for public or organization review).</i>	Whatever revisions are proposed, a written version should be circulated prior to the second meeting, so that all can consult with their constituents...At the beginning of the second meeting, all should be prepared to adopt a final set of ground rules and a work plan.
2.4	<i>Assess options for communicating with the constituencies represented as well as with the community-at-large.</i>	Once the decisions are underway, some means of communicating with the constituents will be needed.
Step 3: Facilitating Group Problem Solving		
3.1	<i>Strive for transparency (distribute written summaries of all meetings.)</i>	CBA involves a commitment to joint problem solving... The legitimacy of any consensus-building effort hinges on the way the process is perceived by those likely to be affected.
3.2	<i>Seek expert input when fact-finding might be helpful.</i>	Joint fact-finding hinges on the participants working together to 1) spell out the technical matters they want advice on, 2) select a range of experts to advise the group as a whole, 3) help them plan their work, and 4) discuss the policy implications of their work.
3.3	<i>Create working subcommittees if appropriate.</i>	Subcommittees should not be given decision-making duties... Their goal should be to make the work of the full group easier and to provide a starting point for informed discussion of one or a cluster of agenda items.
3.4	<i>Seek to maximize joint gains through the brainstorming of packages.</i>	The process of packaging can be handled by the facilitator meeting privately with key stakeholders between meetings and then crafting a bundle of proposals, or package, without saying who specifically offered what to whom.
3.5	<i>Separate inventing from committing.</i>	No one should be asked to make a firm commitment to a package or proposal until they are absolutely ready to do so... nothing said during brainstorming can later be thrown back at someone as a promise made earlier.

3.6	<i>Use the help of a skilled facilitator.</i>	There are growing numbers of accredited professional facilitators who can provide these services on a very reasonable fee-for-service basis.
3.7	<i>Use a single-text procedure.</i>	There can be no agreement on anything until the full package is agreed upon by everyone at the conclusion of the process.
3.8	<i>Modify the agenda, ground rules, and deadlines as you go.</i>	New members need to be given a chance to review everything that transpired prior to their arrival... No one has made a firm and final commitment until they have reviewed the full package and checked it with their constituents.

Step 4: Reaching Agreement

4.1	<i>Seek unanimity on a written package of commitments</i>	Straw polls are a good device for determining how close the participants are to reaching agreement.
4.2	<i>Use contingent commitments, if appropriate, to deal with uncertainty or risk.</i>	Sometimes a table of contingent options can be added to an agreement to win the support of remaining holdouts... the group spells out the revised terms of their agreement under each of these increasingly unlikely circumstances and incorporate the relevant table into the agreement itself.
4.3	<i>Adhere to agreed-upon decision-making procedures.</i>	The only changes allowed in the process of decision making should be those made by the full group, using a method of amending the ground rules made explicit in the original rules.
4.3.1	<i>Ask who can't live with the package</i>	Anyone who indicates that he can't live with the package is obliged under the ground rules to explain why.
4.3.2	<i>Ask those who object to suggest improvements that would make the package acceptable to them without making it unacceptable to others.</i>	If the person indicating unhappiness with the package cannot think of a way to do this, others in the group should be encouraged to help.
4.4	<i>Keep a written record of all agreements.</i>	The final written version of the package should indicate dissenters and why.
4.5	<i>Maintain communication with all relevant constituents and the community-at-large.</i>	The process is not complete until the final draft of the package, approved by those at the meeting, is circulated to constituents and to the convener for ratification prior to the final meeting.

Step 5: Holding Parties to Their Commitments

5.1	<i>Seek ratification of the draft agreement by checking back with all relevant constituencies.</i>	The CBA process is complete when the stakeholders return one last time to meet face-to-face to review the comments received when the participants took the penultimate draft out for review.
5.2	<i>At a final meeting, ask all the stakeholder representatives to indicate their personal support for the package by signing the agreement.</i>	Usually, participants are asked to sign a statement that indicates their personal support for the package and their personal promise to work to implement the agreement and to follow through on any commitment they have made.
5.3	<i>Present the recommended package of proposals to those with the formal authority to act.</i>	Explain how the group arrived at its recommendations and make themselves available to answer questions about both the content and the procedures that were followed.
5.3.1	<i>Look for ways to make informally negotiated agreements binding.</i>	Binding mechanisms that will hold everyone to his or her commitments... Including a dispute resolution clause in the agreement is a good way to keep the agreement from unraveling.
5.4	<i>Reconvene the parties if those in authority can not live with the package to see what changes might be possible.</i>	Ideally, the draft of the final agreement reviewed by all the constituents should be circulated informally to the relevant convener or convening bodies for their comments, avoiding this kind of impasse.
5.5	<i>Monitor changing circumstances during implementation and reconvene if necessary.</i>	The facilitator is usually designated as the person to bring the participants together to monitor progress or to prepare a revised proposal that would allow the group to amend its final agreement and take account of unexpected events.