

Text of a talk to the Comox Valley Women's Business Network

WBN Spotlight - 8 October 2009

Our spotlight speaker this evening will be Joyce McMenamon, publisher at Cool Heads Publishing. Cool Heads publishes an unusual book called Democratic Rules of Order which is a new system of parliamentary procedure. Joyce has been a member of the WBN since January this year.

Hi! I am Joyce McMenamon, publisher at Cool Heads Publishing. Our main focus is publishing Democratic Rules of Order. The elevator pitch: it is an easy to use alternate to Robert's Rules of Order for running meetings and can be adopted as the official rules of order for meetings of any size.

So who really cares about parliamentary procedure? It's actually super boring. No plot, no character development, no romance, no space travel.

But, how many people here are involved in organizations where you go to meetings and make decisions together? Apparently in the Comox Valley alone there are 800 community groups of one sort or another from special interest, musical groups, church groups, soccer associations, unions, strata, etc. Most officially use Robert's Rules, some run by consensus, some just wing it. I gave a seminar for a condominium council association a few weeks ago and it was heart-wrenching to hear stories of people that have sold the family home, moved to a condo and are slowly being tormented by the condo bullies. Some have never been to a meeting in their life and now they need to defend their home and lifestyle. But they can't make themselves heard.

So, when you think about the importance of peacefully making decisions together in groups, the rules of order are profound. It's the ultimate conflict resolution tool. You sit together, listen to all the relevant points of view, and then make an intelligent decision. It's what makes us civilized. You just have to watch the news for about 5 minutes to see that there are countless places in the world where using democratic rules would improve life. I would love to send 32 million copies to Afghanistan tomorrow. This is the thing that is exciting.

First let me tell you the story of how Democratic Rules and Cool Heads started.

My parents, Fred and Peg Francis, wrote Democratic Rules of Order back in 1994. They had been to hundreds of meetings for their ratepayers association, college teachers committees, church boards, and business boards and many times they came back frustrated by people talking about irrelevant things, chairs that were clueless, some people manipulating the rules or intimidating the unsure ones. Sound familiar?

But the worst meetings were when my Grandma was in a strata in Victoria. My Dad used to attend the meetings with her and he was a pretty cool headed guy but I never saw him as exasperated as after some of those strata meetings. Finally after a particularly bad church meeting, where people are supposed to love each other, my Mum said to my Dad, "Fred, we need to find a better rules-of-order book." They search diligently for a set of straight-forward rules that everyone could read and understand.

There were lots of great books out there but none that you could expect all the church members to read. So in their usual approach to problems, Mum said to Dad, "Fred, you need to write a new rules book." They wrote a whole new set of rules of order based only on the democratic principles and common practice. It took several more years of refining with parliamentarians and executives until each rule was crystal clear, no necessary rules missing and no parliamentary jargon. It is now in its 8th edition although each edition can be used with previous editions without conflict.

When my Dad passed on in 2003, my Mum didn't want to run the business and my brothers were busy doing their brotherly thing but I did not want to see this vital book fade away. So I started Cool Heads Publishing to continue publishing it. About 15,000 are in use around the world so far, mainly in the US but also across Canada, in England, Japan, even South Africa. Our mission is to raise the level of democracy in meetings.

So what is democracy? The other day, I heard three professors discuss it for two hours on the CBC program, Ideas, and they couldn't agree on a definition. So let's just review the principles. They are twofold.

1. The right of the people to make decisions for themselves.
2. The right of the individual to be properly heard.

Simple, yet the practice is often horribly abused. It's a skill that needs to be learned and practiced. Perhaps even some groups in the Comox Valley.

Let me read you my two favourite paragraphs from the introduction that give the favour of the book.

A democratic ideal

We should remember that we all belong to the same organization, with a common purpose. We can have widely differing views and still work together for a common good without dividing into opposing sides, each trying to get its own way. Best decisions are made when we listen thoughtfully to the information being presented and then make our own decisions privately.

Another democratic ideal

Must we accept a legal decision if it is a bad one? Yes and no. Yes, to practice democracy we must accept the decision and do what it requires us to do. No, we don't have to change our opinion. At some later date the opportunity may occur for a review of the decision, or we may even find the decision was good after all!

We don't have time to go through all the rules right now but you can get the book from the library and read the whole book in 45 minutes.

Another idea you may be interested in is democracy in the workplace. This is a concept that is gaining momentum. A great web site is worldblu.com where they explain the principles of democracy in the workplace and you can even get on their list of most democratic companies. There are several Canadian ones listed. 1-800 Got Junk from Vancouver springs to mind.

So what am I asking for? The publishing business is a steep learning curve for me so if any of you have suggestions for how to get this book known I would be very interested. We are also available for seminars although to be honest you can read the book in 45 minutes and that is way more complete than anything I could present. We are working on an audio book and French and Spanish translations and eventually video clips explaining how each rule works.

If you know of any groups that might want to switch to Democratic Rules of Order I can give them a 5 minute presentation or 30 minutes, whatever is appropriate, if that would be helpful. Ultimately what I hope is that when organizations consider what rules of order they would like to follow to govern their meetings, they have a good look at Democratic Rules of Order.

That's it for now. There is a handout on your tables that has a summary of the rules and on the back is a skill testing quiz. Yes the answers are included. And I have to say I am really appreciating the sharing of wisdom that I get from this fabulous group of business heads.