

THE BICS ULTIMATE GUIDE

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FOR THE

CHAIRPERSON

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Role of a Chairperson

“To take the lead in the organisation and management of the society.”

The Society Chairperson is responsible for society activities and its relations within College and outside. They should oversee the members of the society committee and ensure that the Treasurer and Secretary of the society are keeping in touch with the college authorities. The Chairperson is also jointly responsible (with the Treasurer) for the society's finances.

The chairperson should chair all committee meetings of the society and organise, manage and delegate when required.

Chairing Skills

Chairing meetings is an acquired skill. The success of a meeting will often be dependent on a chair's abilities. It is the chairperson's job to make sure everyone can take part, facilitate clear decision-making. This section looks at how to be an effective chair of meetings, including *ensuring high levels of participation*, *good debating techniques*, and *meeting rules*.

Participation: a chair should encourage all committee members to contribute. You will have to assess the best way of doing this. Some people adopt a system of “going around the table” but bear in mind that this can sometimes intimidate people, particularly new members of the committee. Allow plenty of notice for important items on the agenda, and encourage committee members to prepare reports beforehand. This allows all members to prepare their contribution, aids confidence in the long run, and means no member is being put on the spot. It is important to make sure that all contributions are treated with respect; if a member puts forward a view it should never be ridiculed or shouted down. It is the chairperson's responsibility to ensure all committee members treat each other with respect, keep order, and make sure only one person is speaking at any time.

Debate: a chair must try and keep discussion on the topic in hand, as well as keeping an eye on the time available. It is well worth familiarising yourself with the items that are to be discussed as there will be times when you need to clarify the discussion and an ability to understand what is being said will be vital. A chair has a role in:

- Highlighting proposals that are made in the meeting
- Summarising what committee members have said
- Helping to find common ground between opposing views

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- Summarising what has happened at the end of a discussion, indicating clearly what decisions have been made and who is responsible for carrying them out
- If events come to a vote, clarifying what members are voting on and casting a vote in the event of a tie.

Rules: meetings you chair will be either formal or informal. Your constitution will probably contain a set of standing orders or meeting regulations for larger meetings. It is important that you have read these and have an understanding of how they should be used. The time to use these rules is when you think there may be a conflict, if there is a great deal of business to get through in a short space of time, or when the meeting is large. A chair must explain to those participating in the meeting what rules will apply. It is always worth clarifying procedure before each stage of the meeting so that participants know when they can intervene and put their points across. If members feel that the rules have prevented them from airing their views this will quickly lead to resentment, so give members every reasonable chance to contribute. Above all avoid dominating the discussion or using the chairperson's vote to push through your own views.

Remember:

- Chairing is pivotal to the success of a meeting;
- A good chair is someone who allows people to contribute, ensures everyone understands the discussion and gets a decision made within the time available;
- A chair should understand the society's constitution and rules relating to the meeting.

Leadership skills

A good leader will be willing to place trust in people, but without being naïve about it; will be able to collaborate with them, be loyal to them, and avoid society 'politics'; finally, they should be able to commit themselves fully to the role.

The best way to develop your skills as a leader is through experience. Learning what works and what doesn't as a subjective and experimental process will take time, but ultimately yield better results by giving you a thoroughly earned and understood set of skills. Some of the ways to begin developing your leadership skills are listed below.

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Wear the other shoe: it's important to be able to put yourself in the position of the people you are working with. Being able to assess how they feel about their duties will enable you to guess what boundaries they might have, and how they will respond to your instructions. This skill will also help you to maintain fairness and democracy whilst holding the reins, by allowing you to assess individuals' and group needs.

Communication and body language: a good understanding of these skills will impact on everything a leader does, in both his/her professional capacity, as well as in more personal or social modes.

Questioning skills: learning to question people properly will empower the entire committee, by improving round-the-table discussions and helping to get more information available for the discussion. A good questioner will not seem like an interrogator, but rather gently lead the speaker to expose further points of information. Allied with this skill is the ability to know when to stop or turn the discussion if it gets off track or if irrelevant information is being given.

Assertiveness: this is not the same as being bossy! Assertiveness means being passive or submissive nor aggressive, whilst maintaining control of a situation. Being able to provide direction, whilst making clear choices *according to democratic principles*, is the mark of a good assertive leader.

Negotiation & bridge building: these skills involve communication over a contentious issue. Being able to negotiate between conflicting viewpoints, finding compromise between committee members, and learning to build the bridges between opposing issues, will all facilitate the smooth running of a group.

Understand yourself: the more you work with groups and committees, the more you will learn about yourself. Keeping your own strengths and weaknesses in mind will strengthen your leadership skills; help make sure that you are able either to lead by example or delegate higher responsibility where these fall short; and most of all help you to develop your own self-esteem.

Delegating

Making sure that individual attributes are matched correctly to individual responsibilities is, in fact, the mark of a great chairperson. Unexpected situations can cause delegation to be done rashly; it is the chairperson's duty to remain calm and make decisions both in context and in perspective.

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Misappropriating responsibility leads to a loss of efficiency, and will certainly cause team spirit to suffer in the long run.

Finally, the ability to adjust positively to changing circumstances is essential for long-term and continued success. Remember, it's all about getting the balance right, but *also that the balance is always changing!* Different scenarios will place different demands on the team, so it's important not only for everyone to be aware of their abilities, but also to understand when and where their skills are needed. Even the most essential members of a team may, in fact, obstruct progress from time to time. *The key is to remember that no one person is central; everyone's role is of equal importance, but not necessarily of equal precedence.*

Motivating a Team

Besides the need for goals, team balance *etc.* outlined above, there are certain things which are essential for a leader to do in order to keep his or her team motivated.

Create a relaxed atmosphere: not only at meetings, but about the general mentality of the group, so that people feel comfortable and enthusiastic about their work.

Be available for discussion and follow up on it: make sure you are approachable, and *pay attention!* Follow up either by finding resolutions to problems, ways to incorporate suggestions, *etc.*; or by later checking with committee members to see that they have resolved their issues.

Show a caring awareness: let your team-mates know you are in touch with the goings-on of the group, and that you care about what is happening. Remember that sometimes individuals may approach you with more personal issues. It is important in terms of leadership that you are available for discussion and to give support to your team-mates. Make yourself aware of the support networks (counselling, chaplaincy, *etc.*) which are available in your institution, in case you feel it necessary to refer someone to a higher source of guidance.

Lead by example: it will be hard for anyone who is a *witness to your behaviour* to feel unfair demands are being placed upon them. On the other hand, of course, if your behaviour is insufficient to inspire the group, they are not likely to maintain their motivation for long.

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Be consistent: setting and maintaining consistent standards of behaviour is essential. Try not to react out-of-character in any situation, regardless of the context. Sometimes it will be necessary to increase the pressure in order to get the job done, but try to make even this a measure of your consistency. Even if the sky is falling, a good leader will maintain his/her composure, insofar as possible!

Demand & instil high standards: as detailed at the start of this section, high standards are important for a team's success. Try and instil the same high level of quality which you demand as part of members' work ethic, so that they will rise to these levels of their own accord.

Give praise when merited & constructive feedback: Don't wait for people to slip up before responding to their work, but instead try and catch them doing a job well and praise them accordingly. This will incline people to be more responsive to critical feedback later.

Be fair: at all times, this is your prerogative as a leader. No-one will work for an unfair leader, and no-one will place their trust in one either. Make fairness your watchword as a leader and people will respond accordingly.

Balancing Task and People

The ideal objective of a team is to achieve results through a team of committed and motivated people. This is best done by striking the right balance between maintenance and task-orientation.

Being able to focus on the task in hand is essential. Remember that in the short-term or in a crisis, people will put up with a bossy style, and may even appreciate the added impetus which a clear and direct leader can provide. On the other hand, focusing on the maintenance of people's commitment to the team is better in the long term – but it is important to make sure the group is still getting the job done.

Striking the balance well means assessing a number of factors. Firstly, *you*: your style and experience as a leader; secondly, the *work* to be done: are there deadlines involved? Is your group responsible for the entire project? (*Et cetera*) Thirdly, the *organisation* of the team: its history, the management skill of its members, and the size of the team are important factors. Additionally, the *people* who make up the team will need to be assessed: their skills, ability to get on with the job, diligence, and so on. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the question of *power*: does the team believe in your authority?

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Teamwork

A team is described as ‘a highly communicative group of people with different backgrounds, skills and abilities, who have a shared sense of mission and who have clearly identified goals.’

A team needs the following components for success:

- ✓ Common Goals
- ✓ High Targets
- ✓ Leadership
- ✓ Interaction (involvement of all members)
- ✓ Maintenance of individuals’ self-esteem
- ✓ Open Communication
- ✓ Decision-Making Power
- ✓ Attention to process
- ✓ Time together
- ✓ Mutual trust & developed relationships
- ✓ Respect for differences
- ✓ Constructive conflict resolution
- ✓ Commitment to solving problems together
- ✓ Role clarity – clearly define team
- ✓ Patience – it doesn’t happen over night!

Successful Teams

For successful teams the most important point is that the leader of the team has a good *chairperson* profile (i.e. calm, collected, welcoming, approachable *etc*) as his/her abilities will influence the potential and success of the other members’ abilities.

Creativity is also key for to successful teams, as it will ensure that the more practical members of the group have plenty of ideas to work on. Making sure there is a spread of mental abilities across the group as well as wide team-role coverage (*i.e.* as many personality- and intelligence-types as the group can reasonably accommodate) is the underlying factor for team success.

Team Skills

There are two categories of skills needed in order to successfully run a team: task-oriented skills and maintenance skills. The former are required in order to

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‘get the job done’; while the latter could be thought of as the skills needed to ‘keep getting the job done’. Further skills which combine both categories are the mark of an excellent group leader.

Task-oriented skills: include *initiating* action, *seeking* and *giving opinions* about the job in hand, *elaboration* on what is required for a particular task, *co-ordinating* individuals or sub-groups so that everyone works together, and *summarising* the information which has been presented.

Maintenance skills: are those which will keep the group happy in the long run. These include the ability to provide *encouragement*, *gatekeeping* skills (keeping people on track), *setting standards* and being consistent in observing them, and being able to *express group thoughts* clearly but without omitting individual opinions.

Task-Maintenance skills: combine getting the job done and keeping the team happy. Examples of this type of skill are the ability to *evaluate* (progress, mistakes *etc.*), *testing for consensus* between members of the team, *mediating discussions* and the ability to *relieve tension* without sacrificing the objectives of the job.

Communication Skills

Communication is a vital aspect of management. This section will deal with interpersonal, non-vocal and assertive communication skills.

Interpersonal communication: don’t confuse this with ‘*impersonal*’ communication! It’s exactly the opposite. One of the most important things to think about when communicating is that messages must not only be *sent*, but also *accepted*, *understood*, and *acted upon*. Acceptance requires the receiver to be in the right frame of mind to read, listen, or observe a communication; understanding requires that the communication is unambiguous, and that all parties hear the same message; finally, action requires that the receiver will act in the desired way. Making sure that members of a committee are communicated with clearly and effectively at appropriate times will reduce the distortion between speaker and receiver, resulting in successful action.

Non-vocal communication (NVC): *content* (words) constitutes a very minor part of what translates in a communication when compared to the *process* (body language and tone) of how it is said. Improving on the non-vocal aspects will have a significant impact on your overall communication skills;

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here are some suggestions. Keep your body language *open* by making sure not to cross your arms, legs, or feet; try to relax them instead. *Lean forward slightly* during a conversation to suggest that you are strongly interested in what the speaker is saying. *Mirroring* is the technique of matching someone else's body language – the pace and tone of their speech, their movements, *etc.* – which is shown to improve the other person's impression of you and further good communication. A *firm handshake* will show your enthusiasm as well as giving the impression that you are a serious and capable individual; on the other hand, a weak or limp handshake will suggest that you are disinterested or not quite up to the job.

Assertive Communication: assertiveness requires *being able to summarise* the important points of a discussion and the ability to *make decisions* between varying issues, but without merely convincing others to think what you think. Sometimes it will be necessary to assert a choice which is not your personal preference (and may, in fact, not be anyone's preference) but is necessary or for the good of the society. Try and present people with *win-win situations* when possible, as this will make sure asserting a decision will not cause resentment; people will maintain their self respect as well as feeling respected by their leader. Assertiveness also requires *open lines* of communication, to ensure that decisions being made are well-informed and consider all opinions. A key benefit of an assertive leader is that he or she will *engage and develop* those who they work with; make sure that your team-mates are aware of your attempts to develop their skills and strengths.

Conflict

There will inevitably be some degree of conflict between members of a committee. This is not necessarily a bad thing; in fact, many of the benefits of group discussion arise from conflict: fresh ideas often result from differing opinions, and a degree of competitiveness can lead to greater motivation and harder work from individuals. When conflict begins to impair the functioning of the committee, however, conflict resolution becomes important.

There are three basic levels at which conflict can be resolved: *peaceful co-existence, compromise, and genuine resolution.*

Peaceful co-existence: the lowest level of conflict resolution, this may be an option for minor conflicts of opinion. Try to play down the differences while emphasising the common ground which these opinions share. Although this method does not provide a solution to the issue, it will often keep tension low

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long enough to get through the particular situation. If, however, the conflict is an enduring or recurring one, further resolution will have to be sought.

Compromise: if it is possible to do so, compromise can be a versatile solution to conflicts. Try to engage the conflicting members in a negotiation with each other (see below), or negotiate between them if tensions are running too high for a productive discussion between them. The ideal aim is that neither side feels they've lost out, or if they do, that what they gain outweighs the loss. If there is no ideal solution, you may wish to consider taking further steps if time permits; if not, aim for the best possible balance between keeping each individual happy and getting the job done. Then go on to attempt a genuine resolution to the basis of the conflict in order to avoid a recurrence.

Genuine resolution: this is the most time-consuming of approaches, but may prove unavoidable if there is a long-term or deep-seated conflict arising between members of the team. Finding a genuine resolution to the problem requires an exploration of the atmosphere of tension, its causes and possible solutions. One-on-one discussions can prove useful in getting to the bottom of the issue – but remember *not* to get involved in any personal attacks or slurs, even if behind closed doors it seems a safe way to sympathise with the other party: this will not help to resolve the grievance, and may well make it worse by reaffirming contentious opinions. Bring the dispute to other members of the team as well, as often the solution will come from a fresh approach and some distance from the personal issues.

The further a conflict develops, the more useful *professionalism* is in keeping tension under control. For example, if arguments are occurring regularly at committee meetings, making the meeting more formal (i.e. sticking to a well-developed agenda) will help keep the discussion to-the-point. The sense of purpose provided by an agenda will often help people to put aside their differences in order to get the job done, while it also provides the chairperson a good way to keep the meeting moving. For example, try 'Anyway, moving on to the *next* item of business...'

Negotiation

Negotiation occurs when another party has something you want, and when you are prepared to bargain for it. Here we will be dealing with principles for external negotiation (i.e. with parties outside your society/committee) but the principles can easily be adapted for internal negotiation (e.g. in conflict resolution).

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Learn to read the other party's needs: if you know what someone else wants, you're much more likely to be able to get something in exchange for it. For example, recognising that a stationary or bookshop wants a way to attract a student market is a good way to begin getting sponsorship.

Prepare before negotiating: decide before you engage exactly what your needs are, and what your bottom line is (how much you are willing to give; how little you are willing to receive).

Visualise gains, not losses: like most human interactions, negotiation works better for those in a positive frame of mind. Be optimistic, without being naïve, and keep in mind what it is you are aiming for. Not only will this help the interpersonal communication between parties, but will also give you a clearer view of your aim or goal, helping you to avoid selling yourself short.

Practice: be prepared to compromise, but don't let yourself be coerced into giving away too much. Try and work out possible scenarios with your committee beforehand: for example, 'if they demand such-and-such, we should sacrifice **X** but definitely not **Y**'.

Define "agent's" role clearly: if an individual is acting as a negotiating agent on behalf of the group, make sure they know exactly what boundaries they're free to negotiate within: for example, 'we'd like to get the service for €25; the most we can afford to pay is €40'. Also make it clear what they are expected to deliver, and at what cost: 'you have to get this venue, no matter what', or 'you'll have to negotiate with every hotel and get the best deal possible'.

Clarify priorities: write down all your objectives in order of importance. Abandon any unrealistic ones before entering negotiation, as they may irritate or insult the opposition. Then be willing to concede the less important points, so that what you are *giving* away is also *taking* the least.

Be flexible: flexibility is a sign of strength, not weakness. Flexibility shows that you know clearly what your objectives are and what sacrifices you're willing to make. The opposition will, in most cases, recognise and reflect your flexibility.

Gather all key information: 'agree in haste; repent at leisure'. If you rush into a decision without giving yourself an opportunity to review all the facts and figures, chances are you're oblivious to the negative aspects of the deal. If the opposition is attempting to pressure you into making a snap decision, chances are they've noticed a superior advantage for themselves and are trying to get you committed before you see it. If it's worth having, it's worth taking the time to consider in depth; a worthy opponent will accept this.

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Talk to others: especially those who have had similar dealings with the other party. This can provide insight into their needs, resources, delivery, and more. Try to assess their key strengths and weaknesses (in terms of negotiating and partnership) before entering negotiation.

Watch out for hidden agendas: remember that the opposition is looking out for their best interests. Sun Tzu says 'All warfare is based on deception' (*The Art of War*, I, 18), and this is true of negotiation also. Be wary of 'too good to be true' offers or too many concessions. Taking time to work out the details will help to protect your interests.

Keep it simple: over-strategising should be avoided.

Hide short tempers: never walk out of a negotiation in a rage. Bring the sitting to a close as calmly as possible, and arrange to reconvene at a later date.

Six steps to success

1. Get started!
2. Agree the basics: roles, priorities, *etc.*
3. Put aside your fears
4. Encourage contributions
5. Build team spirit
6. Check efficiency