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Public Meeting Etiquette

By Scarlett Sadler

Has your public agency had some tense public meetings lately? If so, you are not alone. Public officials and participants have been feeling nervous, angry, frustrated, scared, confused, and uncertain about the issues at hand and the possible outcomes. Some public agencies are responding by continuing to conduct their public meetings in a virtual setting in an attempt to maintain order during interactions. Regardless of how a public agency is conducting its public meetings, whether in-person or virtually, it is vital for public officials to conduct themselves in a manner that is consistent with a public agency's desired public image. Negative public perception of public officials can bring undesired consequences and attention. Therefore, it is important to remind public officials of basic public meeting etiquette. Meeting etiquette is not regulated by a set of rules or laws; however, the following basic principles can be utilized by public officials to obtain the most desirable outcome during a public meeting:

- The agency procedures for public comment, including applicable time limits, should be explained at the start of each meeting.
- Public officials should not deviate or stray from the agenda. Off-topic conversations should be conducted after a meeting.
- All members of the public should be addressed with courtesy and professionalism.
- All public officials should practice active listening and respect others' points of view. Speakers should not be interrupted. If thoughts come to mind, they should be written down and addressed when the time has presented itself.
- Discussions can be or become quite contentious, especially on topics that have diverse views and opinions. It is important to maintain composure and address discussions objectively and fair-mindedly. If no action or comment is required from a public official, unnecessary dialogue should not be added.
- Public officials should avoid speaking or acting in a manner that could be perceived as bullying, abusive, condescending, discriminatory, or derogatory.

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- Public officials should ensure that comments do not appear as personal attacks on other public officials. Heated and emotionally charged language or behavior should be avoided.
- Public officials should not engage or encourage conflicts between other public officials.
- All public officials should practice basic cell phone etiquette by silencing or turning off their cell phones and not utilizing cell phones during a public meeting.
 - ◊ A discussion regarding official business for a public agency while utilizing a personal cellular device could be subject to the CPRA (California Public Records Act). Public officials should avoid using personal email, text messaging, or social media accounts to discuss any official business that may pertain to their position or agency.

Since emotions can often fuel conflict during a public meeting, it is important for public officials not to add to these emotions. Ensuring professionalism and poise among public officials can be vital for the continued success of a public meeting. Public agencies should review their meeting practices and/or code of conduct to ensure that public officials understand the type of behavior expected of them, not only during a public meeting but in every interaction on the public entity's behalf.

For additional questions or assistance, please contact PRISM's [Risk Control Department](#).