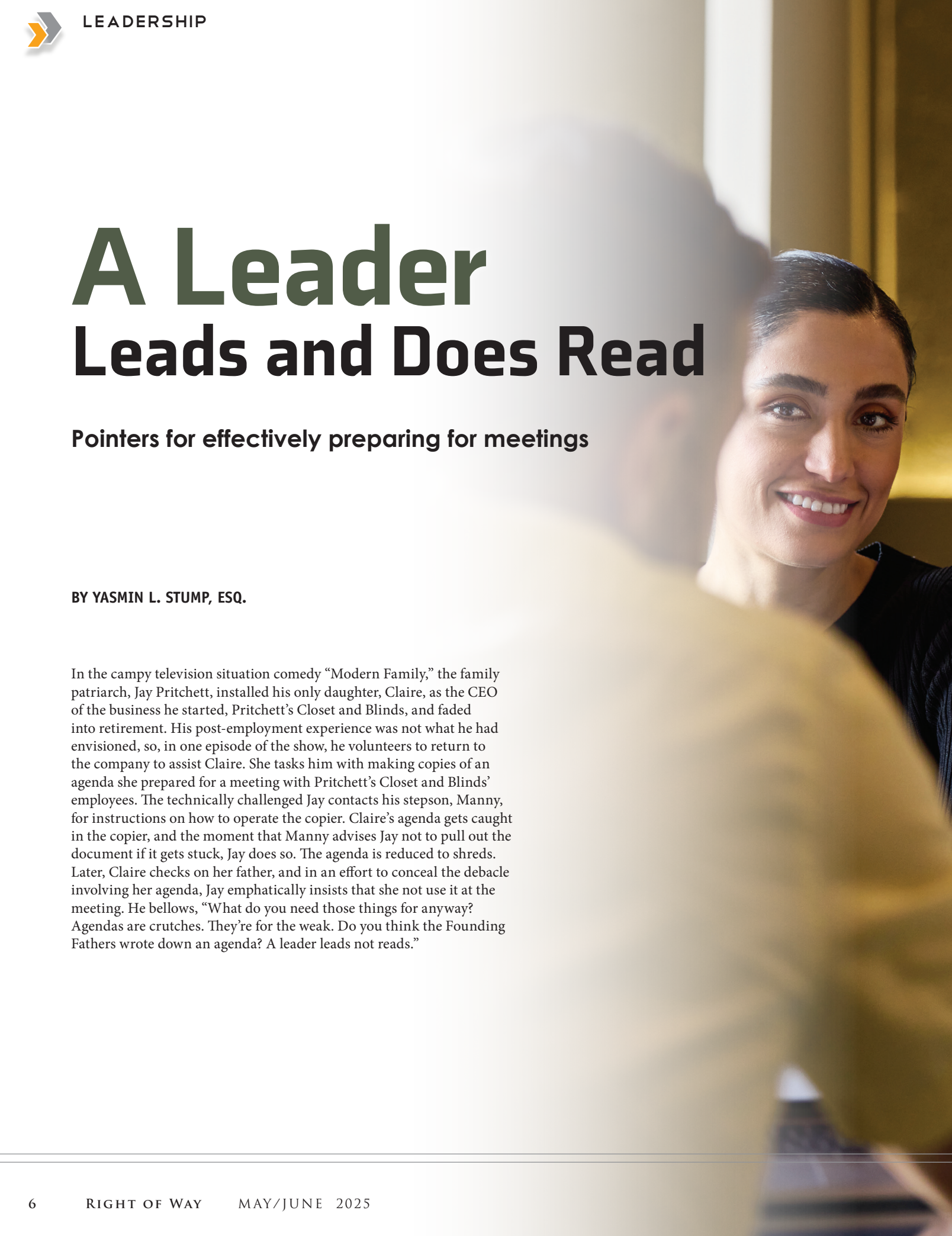
A Leader Leads and Does Read

Pointers for effectively preparing for meetings



BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.

In the campy television situation comedy "Modern Family," the family patriarch, Jay Pritchett, installed his only daughter, Claire, as the CEO of the business he started, Pritchett's Closet and Blinds, and faded into retirement. His post-employment experience was not what he had envisioned, so, in one episode of the show, he volunteers to return to the company to assist Claire. She tasks him with making copies of an agenda she prepared for a meeting with Pritchett's Closet and Blinds' employees. The technically challenged Jay contacts his stepson, Manny, for instructions on how to operate the copier. Claire's agenda gets caught in the copier, and the moment that Manny advises Jay not to pull out the document if it gets stuck, Jay does so. The agenda is reduced to shreds. Later, Claire checks on her father, and in an effort to conceal the debacle involving her agenda, Jay emphatically insists that she not use it at the meeting. He bellows, "What do you need those things for anyway? Agendas are crutches. They're for the weak. Do you think the Founding Fathers wrote down an agenda? A leader leads not reads."

Clearly, Jay's attempt to dissuade Claire to conduct her employee meeting without an agenda is based upon his self-serving interest to avoid disclosing that her agenda was destroyed. However, contrary to Jay's assertions, effective leaders do rely upon agendas. One of the responsibilities of a leader in any organization, including IRWA, is to chair meetings. Often leaders feel in trepidation about doing so. Thoughts about agendas, minutes and Robert's Rules of Order swirl through their heads like tornadoes on steroids and are sometimes intimidating and overwhelming. But they need not be. Like so many other duties of a leader, overseeing an efficient and productive meeting commences with thoughtful planning and preparation.

Start with Scheduling

One of the first steps for a chair to plan a meeting or meetings is by scheduling it or them. The frequency of meetings and notices to be given for the meetings can typically be found in the organization's bylaws. If not, then the chair can solicit input from the members required to attend the meetings about the frequency and when they are scheduled. Given the busy schedules of right of way industry professionals, advance, rather than last minute, scheduling of meetings ensures that they are placed on members' calendars and that they will be well attended.

If the organization's bylaws require that formal notice of a meeting be provided in a certain manner or manners and a certain period in advance of the meeting, then the notice needs to be given accordingly. The bylaws may also state the officer required to give that notice. Typically, the chair or secretary of the committee, board or organization sends notice of the meeting.

In other situations, meetings need not be conducted on a regular basis but only when necessary. For ad hoc meetings, it is still well advised that they be planned well in advance unless an urgent situation exists, and an eleventh-hour scheduling is mandated.

Agendas are road maps for meetings

Prior to the meeting, a beneficial practice is for the chair to prepare and circulate an agenda to the committee, board or membership. Think of an agenda as a road map for the meeting. Agendas allow for an organized meeting and serve as advance announcement of the topics to be addressed at the meeting. The name of the organization and the date, time and location of the meeting are stated at the top of the agenda. Items included in the body of the agenda are the call to order; the approval of the agenda, which is optional; approval of the minutes (from the prior meeting); a consent agenda, which is also optional; officers' reports; committee reports; old (or unfinished) business; new business; and the adjournment.

A consent agenda, also called a "consent calendar" in Robert's Rules of Order, includes matters that are generally routine and do not require discussion or debate at the meeting. Examples of items that can be part of a consent agenda are approvals of the agenda and/or previous meeting's minutes and routine financial matters.

Here are a few practice pointers for creating agendas. Prepare the agenda with input from the committee, board or membership. Specifically, before the agenda is finalized and sent to the committee, board or membership, ask the members who are required to attend the meeting if they have any items they want included on the agenda. It is helpful to those attending the meeting to include the specific location of the meeting, and exercise caution when super copying an agenda from a previous

meeting to ensure that the information is correct. Also, written reports can be solicited from those responsible for providing reports, like committee chairs, and these written reports can be attached to, and distributed with, the agenda, which is sent to those required to attend the meeting. Written reports are particularly valuable if the person required to make a report is unable to attend the meeting. A written report given in lieu of an oral report saves time.

Speaking of time, an agenda can include the time allotted for each agenda item, which keeps the meeting on track. Although some members attending a meeting may balk at time limits for their matters on the agenda, loquacious speakers will be discouraged from dominating the meeting, and time restrictions allow for addressing all items on the agenda before the meeting is adjourned.

Minutes take more than minutes to prepare

While an agenda tells the committee, board or members where they are traveling before and during the meeting, minutes tell them where they have been. Meeting minutes are the official record of a meeting. An officer, usually the secretary, takes the minutes and needs to be someone other than the chair who is leading the meeting.

Like an agenda, good practice dictates that the minutes from the previous meeting be disseminated in advance of the subsequent meeting so they can be reviewed, and revisions proposed prior to the next meeting. So, what needs to be included in the minutes? According to Robert's Rules of Order, the first paragraph of the minutes should contain whether the meeting was regular or special; the name of organization; the date, time and place of the meeting; the presence and names of the chair and secretary or their substitutes; whether the minutes of the prior meeting were read and approved as is or approved as amended or corrected; that a quorum was present; and the time the meeting was called to order. The body of the minutes should have a separate paragraph for each subject matter. The content of reports that officers and committee chairs make do not need to be included in the minutes, only the motions arising out of the reports, according to Robert's Rules of Order. A statement made about the individual who made the report at the meeting is only required. However, it is not uncommon for reports to be included in the minutes.

In the minutes, motions made at a meeting need to be accurately recorded, including the precise language of the motion and any amendments made to the motion. The person who made the motion must be stated and that the motion was seconded. However, the person who seconded the motion does not need to be noted in the minutes. A summary of the discussion or debate on the motion can be included. Additionally, the minutes need to reflect whether a motion passed (was adopted) or not (lost) after discussion or debate. The number of votes in favor and against a motion, as well as abstentions, can be included if individual votes are counted. It is important to note that a motion that is withdrawn by the maker is not made a part of the minutes. Finally, motions made can be numbered sequentially for the organization's year (calendar, fiscal or elective) as a best practice, but it is not required by Robert's Rules of Order.

The adjournment time of the meeting must also be reported in the minutes. A motion to adjourn the meeting is required if all the agenda items were not addressed at the meeting. The motion to adjourn the meeting and who made the motion to adjourn do not need to be recorded in the minutes. After the minutes are completed, the preparer of the minutes signs and dates them once they are approved by the board, committee or membership. Also, the meeting chair may also sign the minutes, but it is optional, and the language "respectfully submitted" does not need to be included.

Commentators on Robert's Rules of Order note that preparers of minutes often include too much information and make their job more difficult than needed. My recommendation is that, when preparing the minutes during a meeting, use the agenda in Word format to record what transpires at the meeting, and then review, revise and finalize the minutes later. Carefully proofread the minutes after they are prepared to ensure that agenda remnants are not inadvertently made a part of the minutes. Also, it is important to note that the minutes should be an objective report. They should never include the preparer's opinion about a matter reported, such as, "the treasurer gave an outstanding report about the financial health of the organization." Finally, minutes are approved through a motion made by a member entitled to vote at the meeting at which they are presented.

Commanding leadership involves effectively leading meetings, and to do so, thoughtful planning, including preparing an agenda, is paramount. Modern Family's Jay Pritchett was wrong. An effective leader leads and does read. ✪

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