

An ancient piece -- the President is Reagan and the language sexist -- but the sentiments remain valid

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LETTER

Dear Editor,

Given that Barbara Walters can tell the President of the United States that his time is up, as she did with polite firmness on a number of occasions while moderating the recent Presidential debate, I never cease to wonder at the unlimited ineptitude of many so-called "chairmen" at professional meetings. A particularly shocking example was mentioned in the letter in the September *Bulletin*, in which one speaker in a session was allowed to ramble on for forty minutes, allowing the last speaker only seven minutes.

It seems to me entirely self-evident that the organizers of any meeting have an obligation to all those attending to determine in advance, and with the utmost clarity and openness, exactly how much time each speaker is allowed. To permit a speaker to determine this for himself makes about as much sense as allowing someone to determine his own salary. Once a speaker has been advised (hopefully months before the meeting), the chairman's number one responsibility (and it is so far ahead of his number two responsibility that number two hardly matters) is to keep the meeting on time. The speaker must be clearly told that his allotted time is not a target - it is a limit. It is like catching a plane - you may be earlier if you wish, but if you arrive after the indicated departure time you have a major problem. Requests for more time than is allotted should be entertained (and usually rejected) in the early planning stages prior to the speakers agreement to participate. They should *never* be entertained after he

has consumed his agreed-to allotted time.

Less experienced speakers should plan for some reasonable safety margin (say, aim for twelve minutes when fifteen minutes have been allotted). The meeting organizers and the chairman owe the speaker clear feedback on elapsed time during his presentation. With today's technology, the whole process would benefit if the audience were also aware of the elapsed time. If a speaker has been allotted, say, fifteen minutes, then the chairman *must* stand up at about fourteen minutes and fifty-five seconds, advise the speaker that his time is consumed, and proceed to the next item on the program. The chairman's interjection should come out of the speakers time, and not out of the next item, which is usually the discussion of the paper. A speaker finishing early should be rewarded with additional discussion time. Discussion is a main reason for having meetings. Hopefully, the audience is literate and able to read written papers.

As a chairman using the above approach, I have never had to terminate a speaker. Once the ground rules are clearly explained, compliance follows just as certainly as does audience gratitude.

As professionals, we have nothing more precious than our time. I believe that we owe it to each other to treat this commodity with the utmost respect. Please, let us all make an extra effort to discontinue our present ways of doing things. We must all strive to reverse (in hope that we might at least weaken if not actually negate) the present overwhelmingly stable law of meetings: "The more worthless the work and the more poorly it is presented, the more meeting time is devoted to it"

Leonard Evans

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