**Note:** While none of the following scenarios are 100% factual historical accounts, they do all draw on elements of real-life situations.

**Case 1: When routine discussions go awry**

You are chairing a meeting of your student group, and you’re discussing your priorities for the year. You’re in the process of summarizing notes from a retreat you guys have had previously (that weren’t sent out in advance of this meeting, but almost everyone was at the retreat, so should remember). As you’re going over your plans for the year, you notice that your VP Events (who wasn’t at the retreat) is starting to get kind of agitated. You start talking about what the group had brainstormed for events for the year: getting a speaker in, maybe a ski trip, that sort of thing, when the VP Events interrupts.

“I’m just going to stop you right there. That’s not what I want to do at all, and I don’t see why you thought you could do this planning without me. As a matter of fact, those all sound like pretty stupid ideas.”

One of your other members tries to cut in here, and the VP Events shuts him down with a pretty cold, loud “Excuse me, I’m talking.”

The VP Events proceeds to get back to ranting, and doesn’t seem likely to stop.

1. As Chair, what do you do? Do you let the VP Events keep ranting? If you think you should intervene, how?
2. How do you get the meeting back on track?
3. Why do you think the VP Events is upset?
4. If you could get a do-over on this meeting, which of the tips presented in this session do you think you could use to make the meeting run more effectively?

**Takeaways**

You intervene: letting the VP Events keep ranting is ‘going with the flow’ and will create a lot of frustration. Do it respectfully, don’t assume you know why he’s upset, and offer an alternative time to discuss it.

Move the group away from the conflicted item and promise to come back to it. It’s probably better to handle it as a post one-on-one meeting with the VP Events. It can be difficult, but it’s easier if you catch the rant before the VP Events gets really, really angry.

He’s upset because they feel like the group has taken his portfolio away from him, and that you’ve planned the year without his input. He feels like he’s being excluded, and was probably taken by surprise by the discussion.

You should have circulated the retreat notes in advance, and you should have a set of conduct expectations for members that include encouragement to be polite to one another and to not interrupt. Most meeting rulebooks have a set of these in them that you can use. It might have
helped to ask the VP Events if they wanted to add something as soon as you noticed that they were getting agitated. Some groups use something called a vibes watcher to help the Chair manage that kind of intervention. You also should have planned for how to involve people who weren’t at the retreat in the discussion, or made it clear that not attending the retreat meant that you would be out of the loop on planning for the year: we call that contextualizing the discussion.

Case 2: All is Well
You’re in the reports section of your meeting. The VP Fundraising is giving a report about a meeting with a potential sponsor that had been previously discussed with your Exec. She reports that the sponsorship package they discussed is for about 10% less money than your group had originally planned for, but that none of the other terms of the arrangement had changed, so she agreed and signed the sponsorship agreement. She asks the rest of the Exec if they have any questions about her report.

The VP Finance asks why she felt comfortable signing the agreement without reporting back to the Exec first. She indicates that it was because the difference in funding was small, and the rest of the agreement was the same, so she thought it would be fine.

The VP Finance responds that he disagrees with how she handled it and that she should have reported back to the Exec first to get their feedback.

Clearly caught off-guard, the VP Fundraising doesn’t respond right away.

1. As Chair, what do you do to manage the conflict that’s arisen?
2. If you could get a do-over on this meeting, which of the tips presented in this session do you think you could use to make the meeting run more effectively?

Takeaways
Step in. Acknowledge the concerns of the VP Finance, but don’t take sides. You should take this opportunity to try to open the discussion to the rest of the Exec. Don’t dwell on whether or not the VP Fundraising was wrong – you don’t need it to turn into a gang-up. Instead, facilitate a quick discussion about what the group expects from its individual members when acting on its behalf, and come to a clear, written statement in the meeting notes that you agree on (either by consensus or majority) about what the individual should do next time this comes up. If the VP Finance is really adamant that the VP Fundraising was wrong and lobbies for her decision to be changed, try to move that discussion to a post-meeting between the 3 of you, and report back to the full group next time it meets. No matter what, you as Chair should follow-up after the meeting to make sure no rules were broken by the VP Fundraising. If none were, you don’t need to bring it up with the group. If there’s a problem, talk to the VP Fundraising first and work with her to figure out how you want to solve the problem and bring it to the rest of the group.

You don’t need a do-over, as there’s nothing wrong here. This is the kind of conflict you should welcome. That being said, groups that do written reports in advance of email don’t run into these sorts of conflicts as often. It can be quite difficult to get the group to do that kind of reporting consistently.
Case 3: The Waste of Time Effect

It’s November and you’re the Chair of your Exec. Everyone’s really busy with schoolwork and feeling pretty burned out about your group. Everyone (including you) is also feeling really frustrated about how your Exec meetings are going. It’s not that they’re bad – there’s no yelling or anything. It’s just that they take about 3 hours once a week and it feels like NOTHING ever gets done. Take last week, for example:

You had to start half an hour late because a bunch of people didn’t tell you they weren’t coming, so you had to call them and wait around to get quorum. Then, everyone had last-minute stuff they wanted to add to the agenda – one person even tried to add something that was already on the agenda. Each Exec report took 20 minutes to get through, and you kept having to stop interruptions and side conversations. People kept getting interrupted with jokes or side-tracked by stories. By the time you got to the actual business, you’d been in the meeting for an hour. One of the ‘added at the meeting’ things is a request for budget to buy swag. The presenter hands a budget around as he’s introducing the item. At the end of his introduction, he says “I guess this should be a motion.” It takes 10 minutes for the group to work out the wording of the motion, and debate is mostly a bunch of questions about what the swag should be, where the money’s going to come from, and who the supplier is going to be and why. Then you have an argument about colours, then an argument about ethically sourcing the swag. When you lose quorum 20 minutes later, the motion’s been amended 7 times, and you still haven’t actually come to a decision. Argh!

1. What’s wrong with this picture?
2. What could the Chair be doing differently to make business move more smoothly? How about the other meeting participants?
3. If you could get a do-over on this meeting, which of the tips presented in this session do you think you could use to make the meeting run more effectively?

Takeaways

This mostly has to do with not being prepared – even though agendas are getting sent around in advance, no one’s reading them, and no one’s taking the time to ensure that the agenda is complete. It also demonstrates that effective meetings aren’t totally the responsibility of the chair – everyone has to be working together to try and make the meetings work.

The Chair should start trying to wean people off of bringing business to the meeting at the last minute. If you don’t circulate a motion in advance, you have to wait until next week. If debate is a bunch of questions, suggest that the proposal get referred to the proposer for more work and that it come back when it’s a little bit more comprehensive. Have a frank discussion with the group about how frustrating meetings are and see if they agree, and ask them for suggestions that the group can work on implementing together.