

WHEN I NEEDED TO LEAD, A GENERAL SHOWED ME THE WAY

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



U.S. Army Brig. Gen.
Henry M. Robert



When I took my first leadership job half a century ago, I had no idea what I was doing. Luckily,

thanks to a brigadier general, I got a little help.

This all happened in grade school, when I was elected president of my 4-H Club. Although it's a great youth group that teaches kids a lot about service and community, 4-H wasn't as cool as the football team, so there wasn't a big field of candidates on campus to run it. I think I became 4-H president by default.

As a shy boy who spent much of my time curled up with books, I'd never headed up a meeting. Our club sponsor handed me a small gavel and a handout cribbed from *Robert's Rules of Order* to get me started. I had no clue who Robert was, but he seemed pretty dull. I didn't quite follow his lessons about bringing a meeting to order, entertaining motions and seeking someone to second them, or tabling

Robert's Rules of Order is a masterpiece of civil discourse, the foundation of good leadership.

ideas that no one could agree on. But slowly, I grasped the bare basics, which came in handy for a novice president still not old enough to shave.

Along the way, *Robert's Rules of Order* taught me a few things about good leadership, too. Using principles of parliamentary debate meant I wouldn't have to dream up my own plan for running a meeting. I also liked how the rules drew their strength from other members. Leadership, apparently, wasn't something I'd have to tackle all by myself.

I owed a lot to this Robert fellow, but I never looked him up to say thanks. Here, belatedly, is what I discovered the other day in seeking him out. Henry Martyn Robert was an engineering officer in the Union Army during the Civil War who had been transferred to New Bedford, Massachusetts, for lighter duties after he'd suffered a recurrence of tropical fever. Asked to chair a local meeting about the city's defenses from a possible Confederate naval attack, Robert floundered, not knowing how to go about it. In later meetings in other parts of the country after the war, Robert discovered that everyone seemed to have their own ideas about proper procedures. That led him to create a common way of doing things with his *Robert's Rules of Order*, first published in 1876.

Robert rose to the rank of brigadier general and died at 86 in 1923. More than a century later, *Robert's Rules of Order* remains in print, still going strong after several revised editions. Its basic values tell us just about everything we need to know about leadership. Honor civility. Draw on the wisdom of those you lead. Let others have the floor sometimes. Know when it's time to go home.

Thank you, General Robert, for showing us how it's done.

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