State board of education members have the responsibility to lead and the opportunity to participate in a wide variety of presentations and meetings. While most people in attendance are respectful and cooperative, occasionally there are those who do not follow basic rules of etiquette and decorum. This is particularly difficult when a guest speaker has been invited to address the group.

Most board members will probably recognize several of the following boorish behaviors:

- Talking well beyond the time allotted for discussion or Q&A;
- Talking about subjects that are not germane to the agenda or presentation;
- Initiating side conversations with neighboring participants;
- Being condescending to the ideas of others and appearing self-important;
- Being argumentative;
- Interrupting others’ comments or dominating the discussion; and
- Displaying a lack of interest by being unprepared for the meeting or engaging in other activities during the presentation (such as talking on the telephone or reading).

Leaders are responsible for setting the tone and parameters for events. Responding to problem participants requires judgment—the level of response should be appropriate to the level of infraction. Some situations can be avoided through preemptive action; others require action on the spot.

Preemptive actions prevent problems before they can occur and establish methods of responding to situations that arise in a meeting. They include:

- Establishing ground rules and reminding attendees of those rules before the session begins. Include these rules on any printed program or agenda. Examples include reminding everyone that the speaker is a guest and should be shown respect, limiting questions to one per person, setting a time limit on each question, or accepting questions only in written form.

- Beginning with a friendly reminder that ringers of cell phones should be turned off for the duration of the meeting. This serves as a reminder to participants not only to turn off phones but also to excuse themselves from the meeting before answering any incoming calls.
• Appointing a meeting facilitator who is charged with keeping the remarks focused and the meeting proceeding on time. The facilitator should be professional and even-handed, polite but firm. Much of the facilitator’s job will be to respond on the spot to unexpected disruption.

• Appointing a timekeeper. Reminders that it is time to move forward can minimize the dominance of someone who is taking over a particular discussion. A timekeeper can be helpful to make sure meetings progress as needed even if the conversation is productive.

• Empowering the facilitator to call for breaks if needed. Short breaks that allow participants to move around will help them focus when they return. Be sure to specify the duration of the break so that participants will not return late and disrupt subsequent presentations.

• Designating a sergeant-at-arms empowered to remove particularly disruptive participants. This is rare, but sometimes remaining participants can only benefit from a speaker or discussion when the source of disruption is removed.

Dr. Teresa Parkey Barao, Director of Business Communications, Robert H. Smith School of Business, University of Maryland, also provides recommendations for actions that can be taken on the spot:

• Facilitators can ask questions to control a question and answer session or panel discussion. These questions can move the conference forward: “Shall we begin?” Additionally, questions bring the discussion back on track: “Shall we consider that topic for another panel?” “Do we need to make sure we hear from the other speakers before we run out of time?” Or, “Do we need to decide this before moving forward?” Questions can also provide closure: “Is there a final question before we move on?”

• In a meeting that is getting a bit heated or otherwise less productive than you would like due to participant pathos, facilitators can regain control through reframing. “Reframing” combines skill in communication with an ability to analyze what’s happening on the spot by “laundering language.” To reframe, the facilitator extracts inflammatory or negative impact from a statement, and seeks to clarify the legitimate underlying motivation for that statement. This can also help minimize the condescending nature of the comments made by participants.

Dr. Barao counsels: “Facilitating a productive meeting that stays on topic and achieves the desired result is not an easy task. However, being able to focus the group by separating the goal from the process, identifying special interests, and framing problems will allow you to reach your target less painfully. Additionally, strengthening your communication skills with active listening, questioning techniques and reframing will ensure that your participants contribute more fully.”

Establishing strategies to minimize rude behavior helps ensure that one or two uncooperative participants do not diminish the event experience for either the presenters or audience.