

PARLIAMENTARY CENTRE WORKSHOP DOCUMENT  
INFORMATION SESSION FOR NEW MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

## 10 MEASURES OF SUCCESS FOR BEING AN EFFECTIVE MP

In carrying out their various duties, MPs must be able to balance their work in the legislative assembly, party meetings, commission rooms, and their constituency. The following are 10 measures of success on how MPs can be effective in their dealings with constituents, staff, other parliamentarians, the media, and civil society organizations.

**1. Develop Trust and an Atmosphere of Collaboration:** In order to work well, government requires a level of trust between citizens and their representatives. Developing trust requires understanding, patience and the awareness of a common purpose and goal. Every MP should try to appeal to the best instincts in colleagues and be able to discuss the principles they stand for and objectives they intend to achieve during their term.

**2. Master the Internal Regulations of Parliament:** Being an effective MP depends on familiarity and a firm grasp of the internal regulations of Parliament. Understanding and respecting regulations gives power and legitimacy to an MP when in the legislative chamber or parliamentary commissions. New MPs should have easy access to the internal regulations so that they can refer to the regulations often. With time and exposure the regulations will begin to make sense and become easier to follow. It is also advisable to get to know more experienced parliamentarians and seek their advice on a regular basis.

**3. Adhere to the Code of Ethics:** The voters entrust MPs with important responsibilities and they must fulfill these obligations honourably. MPs should ensure that they understand legislative etiquette and their ethical responsibilities. Two important pointers to assist MPs in adhering to the code of ethics include: 1) Avoid anything that could be interpreted as a conflict of interest, 2) Adhere to the rules and agreed upon practices and norms in order to be more effective as a leader and in debate.

**4. Know Where to Seek Information and Legislative Assistance:** MPs cannot be experts in everything and thus should work on topics in their particular areas of interest. This will enable them to become experts on specific issues. This will also help MPs in building their reputations as serious lawmakers among colleagues and the larger citizenry. In searching for information, solicit the help of various interest groups and parliamentary staff. Using the information and advice provided by civil society organizations (CSOs) is a good example of one area where MPs can seek relevant information. Also, working with legislative and commission staff of the Secretariat will be of great benefit to the MP, not only in getting information, but also in taking advantage of the research and briefings provided by parliamentary staff.

**5. Know When and How to Speak in Public:** A big part of an MP's work involves making speeches. Well-received speeches are those that use simple language, are brief and to the point, and that do not try to speak on everything. It is also best to do some research and assessment before speaking on the floor. A speech should always be well balanced if an MP wants to reach as many people as possible. Another important aspect of speaking is discussions with the media. The media are the link between the public and their representatives in government, and are thus an important part of any democracy. Maintaining a good working relationship with the media is crucial. MPs should use the

media to disseminate information and announce their positions on issues or activities they are involved in. When dealing with the media, an MP needs to be professional and discreet in order to earn the respect and confidence of the public.

**6. Manage Your Time Well:** An MP's time is a scarce resource that must be well managed. Organizing, prioritizing and demonstrating commitment to issues of importance are key in the management of an MP's time. The way in which MPs manage their time reflects on them as individuals. The time in the legislative assembly is limited and should be used wisely in dealing with issues of importance to MPs and their constituents. Every MP also has a personal life that demands time and it is equally important to attend to non-legislative responsibilities so as to maintain a balance between work and private life.

**7. Develop Leadership and Diplomatic Skills:** Controversial issues will often be brought up in parliament, and some will occur in an MP's constituency. MPs must always consider the consequences of whatever course of action they choose and should use their skills and position as a parliamentarian to help find solutions. An MP should ask questions, conduct research and be a positive influence both on fellow parliamentarians and on the community at large. Seeking solutions involves building consensus and being willing to compromise. Adopting a new position as a result of new insights is a mark of strength and not weakness, and thus it helps to approach issues with an open mind rather than with a set position. Leadership requires a calm and sensible approach to issues, and accepting that one may be wrong. MPs should develop a reputation for being straightforward and honest, and expect to be treated as they treat those with whom they disagree.

**8. Vote According to Your Conscience:** MPs should be careful about measures they choose to support. Bills and motions should be analyzed in advance in order to avoid the embarrassment of having to vote against bills or motions they already agreed to. After MPs have promised to vote a certain way, they may get fresh insight or information that leads them to change their mind. When this happens, MPs should make their new position known to all in order to maintain credibility.

**9. Maintain an Open Relationship with Constituents:** MPs should remember that they are ultimately responsible to their constituents and that voters will respect MPs for thinking through issues and consulting them before arriving at a decision. Returning phone calls, answering letters, having meetings and doing whatever it takes to ensure that the constituents are aware of what an MP is doing is imperative in the maintenance of open and constructive relations with constituents.

**10. Maintain Gender-Sensitivity:** MPs who seek to be effective in parliamentary work need to be gender sensitive. When analyzing and implementing laws and policies, it is important to consider in which ways men and women will be affected, because more than likely this will be different. It is also important to consult and engage both women and men in constituencies, and promote women as decision makers in order to instil confidence. Other ways in which to be a gender sensitive MP include identifying opportunities to promote gender equality, allocating adequate resources to address gender issues, monitoring commitments on achieving gender equality and using gender sensitive language.

*Source:* This list has been adapted from the *Member Orientation Handbook* prepared by the Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum (SADC PF), 2004.