

## 4.5.8: Serving as Master of Ceremonies

### Learning Objectives

1. Discuss the role of master of ceremonies.
2. Understand the responsibilities of the master of ceremonies.

A **master of ceremonies** is the conductor of ritual gatherings. The master of ceremonies (or MC for short, often written as “emcee”) has the poise and stage presence to start, conduct, and conclude a formal ceremony for a group or community. Typically emcees will be full members of the community, recognized for their credibility, integrity, service, and sense of humor. The emcee sets the intellectual and emotional tone for the event.

At a conference or other business function, the master of ceremonies is often the first person to take the stage and the last one to leave it. They come completely prepared to make sure the agenda is followed, nothing is forgotten, all transitions go smoothly, and the event starts and ends on time. While many business conferences are not humorous affairs, a sense of humor can go a long way in helping defuse tension when unavoidable delays, problems, or errors occur. The emcee is required to help an unprepared speaker accept an award, move to their conclusion, and exit the stage. While a shepherd’s crook might seem like an attractive tool for that role, often eye contact and a nonverbal gesture, such as a couple of steps toward the podium, will do the trick. If not, a gentle hand on a shoulder might be required, or even an interjected word about the schedule. The speaker knows and the audience expects the master of ceremonies to keep the ceremony on track with honor and respect.

If you are assigned to act as emcee for an event, you should have an agenda that includes all the components of the event, from start to finish, with estimations of time, roles, functions, and notes concerning responsibility. If this is not provided for you, you will need to compile it yourself. In either case, make sure the agenda is available far enough in advance that you can study it, become familiar with the key components and transitions, and anticipate any challenges that are likely to arise. If possible, you should also communicate with the people who will be joining you on stage: featured speakers, award presenters, and the like. You need to confirm their availability and understanding of their roles, with special attention to reinforcing time commitments.

One trick of the trade is to incorporate time as transitions. If you have a one-hour ceremony involving several awards and one featured speaker, indicate on the agenda that the speaker has seven minutes for their presentation. Communicate this to them before the event so they can prepare their remarks around this time frame. Then budget three minutes as a transition to the next event. It won’t take you three minutes to make the transition, but by building this time window into the schedule you allow for a degree of overlap that may be required to keep the event on track in case the speaker speaks for nine minutes.

It is especially important to observe the schedule if you are emceeing a multipart event with breakout sessions and/or segments on different topics of interest to different audiences. Imagine an all-day conference for which some attendees registered only for the afternoon session and some only for the morning. Now imagine that the morning speaker was delayed due to a travel mishap. As emcee, would you decide to postpone the morning topic and have the afternoon speaker give his presentation in the morning? If so, you would need to be prepared to give refunds to afternoon attendees who missed the speaker they signed up to hear—and even if their registration fees were refunded, they might still be upset about having spent time and money traveling to the event. The solution? Have a “Plan B,” such as a substitute speaker who is qualified to present on the topic of the “top billed” speaker.

A professional master of ceremonies is expected to keep the event running on time while “making it look easy.” The audience will appreciate the seamless progression as the event proceeds.

### Key Takeaway

Serving as the master of ceremonies is an honor that involves a great deal of responsibility and preparation.

### Exercises

1. Create a sample awards ceremony that incorporates the acceptance speech assignment as well as the introducing a speaker assignment. This assignment then combines three functions into one, where each person plays their role. One person will need to serve as master of ceremonies. If the class is large enough, you may be able to subdivide into groups and hold separate ceremonies in more than one classroom. Planning and preparing a ceremony takes time and attention to detail. It also never goes as planned. Remain calm and relaxed as you perform your awards ceremony.
2. Evaluate a master of ceremonies and post your results. Share and compare with classmates.

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