

## Robert's Rules for a knowledge-creating society

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Robert D. Tollison's astonishing output of books and articles is detailed in our 2010 paper (Crain and Crain 2010). At that time, his publications included 433 articles and books amounting to roughly 40,000 pages. The flow from his pens of many colors continued in the 6 years after that. The analysis of Tollison's productivity and the factors driving it need not be repeated here. What we think deserves a closer look, and the purpose of this paper, is the Tollison process of knowledge creation. Call it Robert's Rules.

Robert's Rules are not right for everyone. And our short list omits a pound of *ceteris paribus* behind Robert Tollison's vast capacity for knowledge creation. We include behaviors we remember most, the ones that contributed profoundly to our professional development. To borrow a phrase from Hayek, we learned by imitation. We suspect that countless others who were swept up by Tollison's relentless quest for knowledge also learned by imitating these rules. We think they are worth preserving, despite the impossible task of adhering to them as diligently as Tollison did. The knowledge Tollison created is stored for future generations. How he created knowledge is what we try to capture and record here.

Our effort to depict the Tollison knowledge-creation process with a set of rules begins with how he defined knowledge. He adopted an easily observable and market-based definition: an article or book accepted for publication. A letter of acceptance from an editor successfully concluded the process of transforming an idea into knowledge. Acceptance was good enough: the prize, the reward, the score, the goal, the win, the finish line. That line of production ended and another began. Tollison obviously had multiple projects in various stages of production.

Robert's Rules are motivated by a reduced-form objective function (an argot Tollison often used): maximize the quantity of publications authored or co-authored.

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## 1 Robert's Rules in brief

### 1.1 Stall talk

How does an idea—however harebrained—get transformed from a conversation across bathroom stalls onto the pages of an academic journal? Some ideas are weak and some are strong; at the stall talk stage this judgment is not obvious. When Tollison heard a new idea he always erred on the side of boyish enthusiasm. He made ideas fun, even serious subjects like constitutions, religion, or war. He made it seem like your idea was one of the most interesting he had ever heard. He had a way of making students and colleagues feel guilty for not following through. Rule #1: never let loose of an idea; assume that it is novel, interesting, and worthy of investigation.

### 1.2 Write it up

Tollison enjoyed discussing ideas up to a point. Ideas not written down, however, added little value if any at all. He once proposed to title a paper “Money Talks, Bulls\*\*t Walks” (asterisks added). This is not a title one normally sees in academic journals. It reflects a disdain for economists and academics whose output mainly was talk, which he called “gab-enomics.” He lost patience with “gabfests.”

“You should write that up.” His students and colleagues can hear those words even now. Many Tollison imitators have adopted that imperative sentence. Few of us can replicate his conviction. He meant it.

Tollison liked the physical act of writing. He wrote like he was painting or playing an instrument, broad shoulders owning the desk, changing pen colors at a bridge or a chorus. His drafts on yellow legal pads are a glyph-like script that require practice to decipher.

### 1.3 Work early and often

Robert Tollison's work ethic is legendary. His days started early. He seemed to wake up while writing. He did not care much for conversation before unloading an explosion of words (glyphs) onto yellow paper. These work habits he shared with his mentor James M. Buchanan, except that Buchanan mostly typed. It surely was part of their mutual attraction for a half-century. Few were close to Tollison professionally who had not passed a work ethic screen.

Lots of folks work hard. Something much more fundamental stands behind Robert's Rule #3. It is the principle that a lack of self-discipline is the main barrier to knowledge creation. The discipline to write and keep writing is more important than academic pedigrees, brains, or anything else. Rule #3 offers a positive and hopeful message: anyone can engage in the knowledge creating society.

### 1.4 Co-authorship as team production

The late William L. Breit once joked that he received a white paper from Tollison which had so many names on it that he thought it was a petition. Tollison did not think teamwork was a joke. He was an Alchian and Demsetz (1972) firm on steroids. He worked best with others. Many others. We tallied 524 Tollison co-authors between 1968 and 2009 (Crain and Crain 2010). Many of these were serial co-authors on multiple papers with Tollison, and

the count increased after the analysis. Robert B. Ekelund, Jr., co-author of 15 books with Tollison, reports that another co-authored book is forthcoming. Rule #4 is that team production through co-authorship often facilitates productivity and competitive advantages in knowledge creation.

The analysis in our 2010 paper finds that an additional co-author increased Tollison's annual output of publications per co-author by 10%. When roadblocks inevitably occur or enthusiasm lags, bring on a co-author with a solution.

Tollison's calling to co-author was in part social. He relished bouncing around ideas with co-authors, in person or on the phone—preferably between 10:00 AM and 7:00 PM, and not during an ACC basketball game. (The late Charles K. Rowley had a habit of calling Tollison in the middle of Saturday games.) He found mischievous joy in surprising co-authors with a turn of phrase, new metrics, metaphors, and titles.

### **1.5 Editors as consumers**

Tollison loved metaphors. In the production of knowledge, he let journal editors and book publishers decide if an idea was good enough. He was influenced very little by what others in the profession thought. Negative comments rolled off his back easily as he forged ahead. Tollison was a fiercely competitive person. Critical feedback from rivals in the profession carried a potential conflict of interest. He was dismissive of critics who argued that quality and not quantity was paramount. Rule #5 champions a market-based approach to knowledge creation.

### **1.6 Don't revise until an editor nibbles**

Tollison typically distributed white papers for comments at the same time he submitted them to journals or book publishers. He rarely waited for feedback before submitting a paper formally. He paid attention to and appreciated feedback on his manuscripts, but he rarely would make revisions without some hint of interest from a journal editor. Rule #6 follows from a high rate of time preference.

### **1.7 If rejected, submit immediately to another journal**

In the 20th Century, this usually meant a 1 day turnaround, unless the university's mail room accommodated an afternoon pick up. Related to Rule #6, if an editor rejected a paper, Tollison would seldom make revisions. Rather, he would submit it to another journal as quickly as possible. He would not dwell on criticisms or consider revisions until he received a revise and resubmit offer from an editor.

### **1.8 There's a journal for every paper**

Tollison had his favorite journals and publishing houses. He routinely and optimistically started with these, sometimes successfully. His articles and books cracked all the top economics journals and presses. A corollary to Rule #8 is never under-sell a paper. Journal and book manuscript rejections are never easy to swallow, but Tollison never gave up on finding a home for a completed paper. He saw a large degree of randomness in the submission process—the luck of the draw in getting a sympathetic referee. Related to

Rules #5 and #6, he assumed that referees might be rivals—unfavorable referee reports might be entry barriers, rather than quality controls.

## 2 A farewell to co-authors

These eight rules explain at least partially Tollison's gigantic curriculum vitae. For those of us fortunate enough to have learned by imitating Robert D. Tollison, reflecting on these rules may refresh the creative process. They remind us of how we developed as knowledge creators. Others may find in Robert's Rules helpful hints, and how the capacity for knowledge creation is passed along. They explain why hundreds of coauthors and students remember him most every day.

## References

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