

Conducting Effective Meetings

Courtesy of the Community Tool Box

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What are effective meetings?

Sometimes it seems as if we're always meeting. We have our regular monthly organization meetings, special task force meetings to work on, urgent actions, and committee meetings for projects our group has taken on. Meetings take up so much of our time because they're the way we make our decisions, plan our actions, and move the work we are doing along. But how many of us hate meetings? We all of have memories of meetings (maybe even last night's committee meeting) that seem to last forever and no decisions ever get made. Someone kept interrupting and moving everyone off of the agenda, the chair had too many of her own opinions, the meeting ran overtime, and by the time it was over, everyone went home tired and unsatisfied. Well, while there's no magic wand to make every meeting more effective, meetings can really help in decision making and planning. They don't have to be painful. They can even be fun. And you can learn how to make your meetings both useful and enjoyable for everyone there. Effective meetings help your group reach its goals.

Why do you need effective meetings?

Did you know that how you manage and run your meetings is one of the biggest "risk factors" for participation and member investment in your organization? ALL of the parts of a meeting are important--planning (especially thinking through agendas and goals); logistics; and chairing skills and principles. All of these parts impact on member participation and involvement.

Each "phase" needs to be paid attention to and taken seriously because good meeting management is critically linked to participation. It is through meetings that the group is or is not able to get things done, solve problems, manage itself in a way that promotes inclusion and safety, and creates a sense of community.

How do you run an effective meeting?

Running or chairing a meeting means more than just moving the group through the agenda. When you chair a meeting, you are responsible for the well-being of the group and the members in it. That demands a certain amount of attention be paid to "group dynamics" and other process issues. All of that "touchy feely" stuff is important!

Remember: Running meetings is a SKILL, not something you are born knowing how to do. Just as with any skill, you will get better with practice--and more confident, too!

When someone says, "Nice job. That was a good meeting," what do they really mean? A truly good meeting happens when attention is paid to the four phases of meeting management:

- Planning for the meeting (Agenda and goals)
- Setting up the meeting (Logistics)
- Running the meeting (Chairing/Facilitating)
- Following up (After the meeting ends...)

Let's begin with:

PHASE I: PLANNING THE MEETING

If you pay attention to planning your meeting, you can avoid the "meeting killers" like:

- Wasting meeting time
- Wasting people's time
- Boring meetings that go nowhere
- Meetings for meeting's sake

Here are the critical steps in planning a great meeting.

1. Decide the goal of the meeting.

Is it to revise the by-laws, plan volunteer recruitment, or something else? No clear goal? A boring and unfocused meeting may result! Come up with a clear goal and the agenda becomes your road map to getting there.

2. Do your homework!

If you need information or research for the meeting, better have it done before the meeting starts. What happens when you show up at a meeting where important information is missing? It's usually a big waste of time!

3. Decide who needs to be there.

If you are working on a billboard campaign, does the whole membership need to attend or just the Billboard Committee? Think before you send out those meeting notices! **When people come to a meeting where they don't care about the agenda, guess what - they usually don't come back!**

4. Plan with others.

This is a great way to develop new leaders AND get other people more invested in the work of your group! Just get three or four interested folks together and hash out the agenda--it won't take more than an hour!

And most important...

5. Good agendas count!

List the amount of time you plan for each item. If someone other than you is presenting some part of the agenda, list that too, and SEND IT OUT AT LEAST A WEEK AHEAD OF TIME. Members of any group should know what they are coming to do!

If the agenda is your road map, than make sure it has all of the stops listed on it, without too many unnecessary side trips. Let everyone know what's going to be discussed; don't keep it a secret!

PHASE II: SETTING UP THE MEETING

1. Start and end on time.

It's disrespectful to abuse members' time and about the biggest turn-off there is! If you must start late because only three people are in the room when you're supposed to start, at least apologize! Better yet, get into the habit of starting on time EVEN if there are only three people in the room. Word will get around and eventually, people will come on time or won't come at all. If people keep showing up late, or not showing up at all, this may be a hint to change your meeting time, or your meeting pattern, or both.

2. Sign them in.

Sign-in sheets do more than tell you who came. They also help update your membership list and give you names for phone trees. Be sure to include name, organization, address, and phone number!

3. "Pardon me, could you move your elbow?"

Meeting spaces should be comfortable and convenient. The room should be centrally located, and the right size for the size of your group. Get there early to set up and try to use a space where you can make a circle, not sit in rows like an auditorium. If the meeting space is hard to get to for seniors or others, try to arrange transportation or perhaps a volunteer "escort" service (a great teen/senior project!).

4. All work and no play is no good!

Have informal time before and after the meeting for people to talk and socialize. That's a big reason people joined your group in the first place, and it's where you can recruit volunteers. Remember, sometimes "the meeting after the meeting" is where people get attached to the group--and also get their best ideas to bring to the next meeting!

5. A regular cycle

If you have a regular meeting cycle, people will start to save the date (e.g. the first Monday of the month); but DON'T HAVE A MEETING JUST TO MEET! Always have a clear goal or don't have the meeting.

PHASE III: RUNNING THE MEETING

Being a meeting chairperson is more than one task; it's many jobs in one. If you take it from the top, your job as a chairperson means it is up to you to:

1. Do introductions

That includes getting everyone to introduce themselves, as well as introducing yourself and your role. When there's a special speaker, his or her introduction is your job too.

Don't forget how good icebreakers can be to loosen everyone up! An icebreaker is something short at the beginning of the meeting to help people get to know each other or dig out some important piece of information in a fun or interesting way. For example, your group could do a "Scavenger Hunt" where people "scavenge" information about each other.

2. Get agreement on agenda and rules

Remember, it's everyone's meeting, so everyone needs to "buy in" to the agenda. You can ask for feedback on the agenda before you begin. Rules like no interrupting, etc. can also be helpful if you have some potential "disrupters" in the house.

3. Keep the discussion on track

If someone's going off the agenda or is speaking too long, pull 'em back in! Be gentle but firm: people respect a meeting that's run well and remember all too clearly the meetings where someone was allowed to go on and on and on.

4. Watch the time!

Remember about starting and ending! Honor agenda time limits. If the group seems to want to go beyond the agreed upon time on an issue, ask for agreement from all members. A statement such as, "We've already used our allotted time for this issue. Would everyone like to continue on the topic for another ten minutes, or shall we go on to the next item on the agenda?" can be a good way to take the group's pulse on the matter.

5. Summarize what you hear

Wrap-up each agenda item by summarizing any conclusions out loud. Then move on when no one objects or everyone agrees.

6. Encourage participation

If a usually quiet person speaks, show your appreciation. Try to draw everyone in and not just let the usual suspects speak!

7. Use the power of your position wisely

Watch what you say and how and how much you say it! Don't take sides, and be fair to everyone.

8. Develop new leaders by handing over the gavel

Try rotating chairing responsibility. The only way others will learn is by watching you and then doing. Some tips for managing people in the meeting: Have a sense of humor, and don't be defensive.

- Use open-ended questions that require people to say more than "yes" or "no."
- Look around the room and watch for signs that you should slow things down or speed them up.

PHASE IV: FOLLOWING UP ON THE MEETING

Just because the meeting is over, it doesn't mean your work is done! In order for you to successfully follow up after the meeting, you will need to:

1. Gather feedback from the group.

You will want to gather information about how the participants felt about the meeting, what could be improved, etc. You may not want to do this at every meeting, but at least once in a while; making sure that people have clear assignments, setting or reaffirming the date for the next meeting, and maximizing opportunities for people to stay around and talk after the meeting (which is very important).

2. Make follow-up calls

The Chair or a designated person may want to make follow-up calls, send out follow-up correspondence, and/or take some follow-up actions. These after-the-meeting activities often serve as the glue that hold the group together.

3. Summarizing the meeting

It's helpful to have a list of the decisions made, with follow-ups. Formal minutes are valuable for many (not all) organizations--they contain announcements, informational items, etc., that are important to report even though they are not "decisions."

Writing up minutes can be boring, and so can reading them. But that's part of the job the secretary took on. Some alternatives can include:

- Have a volunteer do a meeting summary sheet; in addition to the minutes (see the Tools section).
- Have the minutes read more like a story than a formal roman-numerals-type report. Also, place the decisions made in **boldface** or ALL CAPS, so they stand out. Ditto for follow-ups.

ADDITIONAL TIPS TO KEEP A MEETING RUNNING SMOOTHLY:

Tips on handling difficult members

INTERVENTIONS

Interventions are techniques to use when you are confronted with disruption or problems during the meetings. They can be used separately, but are usually more effective when used in combination. Interventions attempt to be low on the confrontation scale but still are effective in getting disrupters under control.

A. Have the group decide

...If someone refuses to stick to the agenda, keeps bringing up the same point again and again, challenges how you are handling the meeting, etc.

B. Use the agenda and ground rules

...If someone keeps going off the agenda, has side conversations through the whole meeting, verbally attacks others, etc.

C. Be honest: Say what's going on

...If someone is trying to intimidate you, you feel upset and undermined, you need to enlist the help of the group, etc.

D. Use humor

...If there is a lot of tension in the room, people are resistant to being at the meeting, scared/shy about participating, you are seen as an outsider, etc.

E. Accept, deal, or defer

...If someone keeps expressing doubts about accomplishing anything, is bitter and puts down every suggestion, keeps bringing up the same point over and over, has power issues, etc. This means: ACCEPT that what they are saying is true, don't ignore it; DEAL with it right there by spending some time on it, or DEFER it to the group for a decision about what to do. Also see points G and H below.

F. Use body language (if possible)

... To quiet side conversations, help quiet people participate, re-focus attention, etc. You can speak volumes by making eye contact, by smiling (or not smiling), or by a change in your seating position.

G. Take a break: Confront disrupters outside the meeting room

...When less confrontational tactics haven't worked, someone keeps verbally attacking other participants, shuffling papers, having side conversations or cutting people off. You can deal with this issue outside the room, at a naturally-occurring break in the action.

H. Confront in the room

...If it's appropriate and will not create backlash, if the group will support you, if you've tried less confrontational tactics already, etc.

PREVENTIONS

Preventions are techniques that can help you avoid disruption from the start. If you use these "preventions" from the start of your meetings, you should keep disruption away.

A. Listen to understand

Don't just pretend to listen to what someone is saying. People can tell when you are not paying attention. Listen closely to understand the points the speaker is making, and restate these points aloud if you are unsure.

B. Stay in your role

You cannot be a participant and the chair of the meeting at the same time. When you blur the lines, you risk alienating participants, causing resentment, and losing control of the meeting. Offer strategies, resources, and ideas--but not direct opinions. REMEMBER: "CHAIRPERSON" DOESN'T MEAN "PARTICIPANT!!" If you are passionate about an issue on the agenda and want to speak, make an arrangement BEFORE the meeting for someone else to chair that section.

C. Don't be defensive

If attacked, criticized, etc., take a "step backwards." Think about what was said before you respond. Once you become defensive, you risk losing the group's respect and trust, and may well make the situation worse.

Now you have the keys to planning and getting through effective meetings in your organization. A good meeting that is well prepared, focused and conducted efficiently can make yours a quality organization, while one that is poorly planned or run will cause a lot of difficulties for your group.

DO'S AND DON'TS

Do's for discussion leaders:

- Model the behavior and attitudes you want group members to employ.
- Use encouraging body language and tone of voice, as well as words.
- Give positive feedback for joining the discussion.
- Be aware of people's reactions and feelings, and try to respond appropriately.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Control your own biases.
- Encourage disagreement, and help the group use it creatively.
- Be a recorder if necessary.
- Keep your mouth shut as much as possible.

Don'ts for discussion leaders:

- Don't let one or a small group of individuals dominate the discussion.
- Don't let one point of view override others.
- Don't assume that anyone holds particular opinions or positions because of his culture, background, race, personal style, etc.
- By the same token, don't assume that someone from a particular culture, race, or background speaks for everyone else from that situation.
- Don't be the font of all wisdom.

Resources

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