

# Effective Meetings

Do you dread attending meetings because they are dull, unproductive, disorganized and too long? With proper planning and preparation, any meeting can be effective and enjoyable. Meetings have several functions. They give members a chance to discuss and evaluate goals and objectives, keep updated on current events, provide a chance to communicate, and keep the group cohesive.

But most of all, meetings allow groups to pull resources together for decision making. If the facilitator starts with a careful plan and finishes with a thorough follow-up, the meeting will run smooth. The following are some tips to help you make your next meeting successful, productive, and even fun.

**Make sure you have a reason to have a meeting.** If you have scheduled weekly meetings, but there is nothing to discuss one week, don't feel obliged to hold the meeting anyway. Get in touch with your group members and tell them there won't be a meeting that week. The group will be grateful that they didn't sit around for an hour wasting time when there was no point to holding a meeting.

**Create an agenda.** Agendas give meetings an order, keep them moving and let people know what's going on. If possible, get the meeting attendees the agenda a couple days before the meeting so they can look it over and come prepared and ready to discuss the issues. You might want to add some graphics, a cartoon, or a saying to the agenda so that it sparks people's interest and keeps them in a good mood. Also, if you are a small enough group, you might want to begin the meeting with everyone checking in - maybe talking about the last movie they saw, or how their week is going. This will bring the participants a little closer and relax the atmosphere. Sometimes this can be seen as a time waster if it goes on too long, so be careful what you use for a check-in.

**Start and end on time.** Choose an appropriate meeting time. Set a time limit and stick to it, if possible. If you keep tangent discussions to a minimum, this shouldn't be difficult. It is your job to make sure everyone stays focused. You might want to assign someone as a time keeper to let you know when it's getting close to the scheduled ending time. Remember, members have other commitments and will be more likely to attend meetings if you make them productive, predictable, and as short as possible.

**Encourage discussion and feedback** from all members throughout the meeting. Often one of two viewpoints dominate, so as the facilitator it's important that you ask for opinions from everyone, even those who are usually silent. Also, solicit feedback from your group members on what they would like to see in the meetings and on what they like and don't like about the current meeting structure. It's important that you don't lose touch with everyone else's opinions.

**Keep accurate minutes and records** of who takes responsibility for dealing with any action items that come up. Minutes should be given out within a few days of the meeting and should include accurate information on your members' individual responsibilities. Make sure that those who couldn't attend the meeting get copies of the minutes as soon as possible. See the handout on Taking Minutes for more information.

**End the meeting well.** Summarize what has been said and end on a positive note by acknowledging the work of everyone at the meeting. Set a time and place for the next meeting at the end of your meeting. Let those who weren't able to attend know when it will be as soon as possible so they can mark their schedules. Try to vary the meeting place, if possible, in order to accommodate different members.

## **Before the Meeting**

1. Define the purpose of the meeting.
2. Develop an agenda with the officers and advisor.
3. Distribute the agenda and circulate background material, lengthy documents or articles prior to the meeting so members will be prepared and feel involved and up-to-date.
4. Choose an appropriate meeting time.
5. Choose a location suitable to your group's size. Small rooms with too many people get stuffy and create tension. A larger room is more comfortable and encourages individual expression.
6. If possible, arrange the room so that members face each other (circle, semi-circle, etc.).
7. Use visual aids for interest (e.g., posters, diagrams, etc.). Post a large agenda up front to which members can refer.
8. Vary meeting places if possible to accommodate different members. Be sure everyone knows where and when the next meeting will be held.

## **During the Meeting**

1. Greet members and make them feel welcome, even late members when appropriate.
2. If possible, serve light refreshments; they are good icebreakers and make your members feel special and comfortable.
3. Start on time. End on time.
4. Review the agenda and set priorities for the meeting.
5. Stick to the agenda.
6. Encourage group discussion to get all points of view and ideas. You will have better quality discussions as well as highly motivated members; they will feel that attending meetings is worth their time.
7. Encourage feedback. Ideas, activities and commitment to the organization improve when members see their impact on the decision making process.
8. Keep conversation focused on the topic. Feel free to ask for only constructive and non-repetitive comments. Tactfully end discussions when they are getting nowhere or become destructive or unproductive.
9. Keep minutes of the meeting for future reference in case a question or problem arises.
10. As a leader, be a role model by listening, showing interest, appreciation, and confidence in members. Admit mistakes.
11. Summarize agreements reached and end the meeting on a unifying or positive note. For example, have members volunteer thoughts of things they feel have been good or successful or reiterate the organization's mission.
12. Set a date, time, and place for the next meeting.

## **After the Meeting**

1. Write up and distribute minutes within 3 or 4 days. Quick action reinforces the importance of the meeting and reduces errors of memory.
2. Discuss any problems during the meeting with other officers and your advisor; come up with ways improvements can be made.
3. Follow-up on delegation decisions. See that all members understand and carry-out their responsibilities.
4. Give recognition and appreciation to excellent and timely progress.
5. Put unfinished business on the agenda for the next meeting.
6. Conduct a periodic evaluation of the meetings. Note any areas that can be analyzed and improved for more productive meetings.