

Effective Meetings

How to Conduct Meetings that Work

Have a reason to meet

When and where the meeting will be held are important considerations. However, the very first question that should be asked is, "Why are we meeting and what do we want to accomplish?" If there are no clear-cut answers to this question, don't hold the meeting.

The dates of some meetings, such as those of standing committees and of the board of directors, may be set by the bylaws. The where of a meeting is usually decided by custom, room availability, or the availability of space at the association headquarters. You may be able to meet at the president's, or other association officer's law office. The time set for the meeting and how long it should run should be given careful consideration. Those held at the end of the day seldom hold the attention of members once normal quitting time has passed. 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. are optimum times for meetings. Whatever timetable you choose, stick to it.

Know who participates

The matter of who attends association meetings is seldom left to the leader. Participants are elected or selected, or they may simply volunteer. In working committees, it's best to have a definite limit on membership; the optimum size for getting results is five to 15 members. If there is no limit on committee size and you have more than 15, divide the members into smaller groups for specific tasks.

The agenda

Do not conduct a meeting without a written agenda. Agendas should be typed up and distributed to all participants well in advance to give them time to prepare. The agenda should list the date, place and estimated length of time of the meeting. The names of the participants should be given, together with the subject of the meeting, some background information and the status of the material to be discussed. Most important, the agenda should clearly set forth the goal of the meeting. An agenda will give the meeting structure and keep in on track. Do not allow the participants to stray from the agenda. Set time limits for all of the items on the agenda. You also need to be sure that new committee members are brought up to date on the committee's activities and plans before the meeting so that valuable time is not spent during the meeting orienting new members.

Seating arrangements

Studies have shown that people react in certain predictable ways in certain physical surroundings. The seating arrangements of your meeting can effect its productivity. Ideally, a round table is best, but this only works for a small group. A wide rectangular or U-shaped arrangement is effective for larger meetings. The leader should be easily seen by all participants.

Start on time

The meeting should always start on time. Don't wait for anyone. It sets a bad example and discourages others from being on time. Take your watch off at the beginning of the meeting and set it in front of you. This shows that you mean to stay on schedule. Briefly state the purpose of the meeting and emphasize the positive aspects of the subject. Each participant should introduce themselves before the discussion begins.

During the meeting

Be sure the group is focused on the same content. You should have a blackboard or flip chart to list the points being discussed. This is also a useful tool in defusing a heated discussion; since listing the points being discussed seems to disassociate the idea from the person proposing it. Before the meeting is adjourned, review the points discussed, conclusions and action items developed and be sure that all participants are in agreement.

Secrets to Better Meetings

Each meeting is unique. That makes it possible to set up a complete set of procedural rules for meeting leaders to follow. However, there are important ground rules that apply in almost all meetings.

Respect Other People's Time. When the meeting gets to the point that the special expertise or knowledge of key participants is no longer needed, offer these people the opportunity to excuse themselves. When they realize you are sensitive to not wasting their time, they will be more willing to help you out in future meetings.

Improve Communications. If you are leading a meeting, gear your vocabulary to the least sophisticated member of the group. Be on the lookout for abstract or pedantic language from other meeting participants and be ready to "translate" such language into colloquial speech.

Record All Ideas. At creative meetings, it is vital to avoid intolerance of participants' seemingly bad ideas. Ideas that seem silly today may be valuable sometime in the future. Record all ideas at a meeting for evaluation.

End Meetings After Defined Responsibilities and Firm Deadlines Have Been Established. If the meeting's purpose is to come up with an action plan, be sure that everyone clearly understands who is to do what by when.

Conclude With Summary Statements. The meeting leader should briefly summarize the proceedings and accomplishments of the meeting at its conclusion to underscore the focus of the meeting and to make clear what individuals are expected to do to follow-up.

Provide Means to Handle Unfinished Business. If time runs out before all points of the agenda have been dealt with, get agreement from participants on a plan to take up the unfinished business at a later time.