

# Meetings: Why They Matter & How to Run Them

Prepared by Leslie Jermyn

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## Part I Overview

The main function of a committee member is to take part in committee meetings. All major decisions are made at meetings so it is impossible to be an effective member if you are not a regular attendee.

The best meetings are those that flow logically, keep all members engaged and energized, elicit a range of useful ideas and information and leave members feeling they have made a valuable and valued contribution.

## Purpose of Meetings

The primary reason for holding meetings is to allow the committee to make decisions. However, meetings also serve a range of other important functions, providing a forum where:

- Members are regularly brought together to focus on their roles and responsibilities, identify problems and plan for the future.
- Members are encouraged and motivated.
- Ideas are shared and discussed and then discarded, improved or implemented.
- Tasks are allocated and reported on.
- Regular updates about relevant issues are provided.
- Members can get to know each other, professionally and personally.

## Meeting Lingo

Not all first-time committee members will be familiar with all the terms that are used during committee meetings. The following is provided to help the uninitiated make some sense of it all.

### The Agenda

The Agenda is the list of things that will be discussed during the meeting. It is usually sent to committee members well in advance of the meeting to ensure everyone has a chance to read and digest it before the meeting starts. Some more sophisticated agendas go further than a simple list, also providing supporting information (explanations, related documents, etc.), as well as details about who will address each item, recommendations for action and how much time each item is expected to take up.

### The Minutes

The Minutes are the official record of the actions and decisions of the committee. They are taken every meeting and approved the next time the committee meets. Generally, meeting minutes will include:

- The date and time of the meeting (including start and finishing times).
- Attendees (including absences and apologies – and noting when people have left and re-entered the meeting).
- A summary of the main points made during the discussion of each item.
- The result of each item discussed (decisions made or deferred, sometimes also including the number of votes for and against).

The minutes are sometimes approved without much thought, or even having not been read by committee members. This is a dangerous practice indeed. The minutes show who voted for what and what action the committee has committed itself to – and they may be referred to as the official record days and weeks and even years after a decision has been made. They should therefore not be treated lightly.

### **Motions and Resolutions**

A "motion" is a proposal for action. "Moving" a motion merely means putting the proposal forward to be voted on. Sometimes motions are amended or reworded before being put to the vote. If the motion is approved by the committee, it is referred to as a "resolution" (i.e. the Committee's decision), which can be legally binding.

### **Quorum**

The word "quorum" refers to the minimum number of committee members who have to present for the committee to legally transact business. The constitution spells out what numbers are required for meetings to take place.

## **The Role of the Chair**

Committee meetings cannot take place without a committee Chair. The role of the Chair is to ensure the meeting is conducted efficiently and that meeting rules are adhered to. The Chair should facilitate discussions, keep members on track and the meeting on time. When a topic has been fully discussed, the Chair will often summarize the points and put the motion to the committee for a decision or vote.

## **Between Meetings**

Committee members should not think that their role begins when the meeting starts and ends when it closes. Before meetings, members should make a careful reading of the agenda and ensure they clarify any points that are unclear. After meetings, members should review the minutes as soon as they are circulated (while they are fresh in their minds) and make note of any amendments they think are needed. Members should also carry out any tasks they have been assigned and keep track of their progress for reporting purposes at the next meeting.

## **Part II Orchestrating Great Meetings**

There is always a degree of mystique around the act of chairing a meeting. As a consequence, many perfectly competent people shy away from the opportunity to do so. But good chairing can be learned. The Chair works to ensure that all members around the meeting table are able to effectively contribute to the decision-making process. This is really for one reason only – to ensure that the results of the meeting will positively contribute to the members that the organization has been set up to serve.

The key to successfully chairing a meeting is to be absolutely clear about the purpose of the meeting. Once the meeting task is understood, it becomes easier to make the other decisions that may arise when chairing a meeting.

## Building the Agenda

Clarifying the meeting's purpose will determine the meeting's agenda, which needs to be developed by the Chair in consultation with key participants. The purpose needs to be printed clearly on the agenda to be distributed to all meeting participants well ahead of the meeting. Only include items on the agenda that will contribute to furthering the purpose of the meeting.

To help develop an agenda for a purposeful meeting, ask the following:

- Are there any decisions that the meeting needs to make so that staff members or volunteers can proceed in their work?
- Are there any key administrative decisions that have to be endorsed?
- Are there any matters coming out of the committees that are at a point where the full meeting has to make a decision on them?
- Are all these items accompanied by clear recommendations for action?

Put any item that calls for energy and fresh ideas near the beginning of the agenda. Also put urgent items early on, in case the meeting has to break with unfinished business. Don't make the agenda too long. Under no circumstances should a meeting run for more than two hours. After that people are tired and unproductive.

It can be a good idea to put time allocations next to items depending on their importance. Don't be obsessed with clockwatching, but you want to be able to give the important things the time they need, and you can't do that if you've frittered away the meeting time on trivialities.

## The Meeting Papers

Make sure meeting papers are sent out at least a week before the meeting, accompanied by any necessary background papers – proposals, budgets, etc. Don't be tempted to include articles that may be of interest but will not really contribute to the meeting's outcomes. Committee members who get swamped with paper may actually end up reading none of it or leave out the pertinent pieces, so that they come to the meeting unprepared – which will make your role as Chair that much more difficult.

If there are unrelated articles of interest, organize a mail-out at a later date or table them at the end of the meeting so that participants can pick up copies on their way out of the room, if they so wish.

Ideally, any recommendations for decisions should also be circulated in writing so they can be voted on at the meeting without any confusion about wording.

Without being too pessimistic, an experienced Chair is not surprised when participants have not read their papers, even if they are brief and relevant. And lack of knowledge about an item never inhibits some people from loudly voicing their opinion or passing judgment and diverting the discussion. Your knowledge of the papers and the meeting's purpose will assist you to calmly but assertively guide the participant to the relevant section of the papers to aid his/her understanding and bring the meeting back on track.

## Meeting Formalities

Have the Secretary note attendance and regrets. Ask if there are any additions to the agenda. Ideally, there shouldn't be as people should be encouraged to put items on the agenda in advance. This gives

people time to consider their positions. Of course, not everybody is that organized, and people must be given a chance to bring up important issues at short notice, but if something really important (but not necessarily urgent) comes up at this stage, consider holding it over to the next meeting.

Have the committee sign off on the minutes of the last meeting. Only people who were at the meeting should vote on this point (a show of hands is sufficient). Minutes are the official record of the actions and decisions of the committee, and should not be taken lightly.

After this comes Matters Arising from the Minutes; this is an opportunity to check that the things that were planned at the last meeting have in fact been started by the people who were assigned to do them (a good Chair will have checked this over with the staff before the meeting). Make sure that this agenda item doesn't swallow up the rest of the meeting's business – nothing should be discussed under this heading if it comes in elsewhere on the agenda, and the Chair should be prepared to politely cut people off quite often.

### **Reports at Executive Meetings**

The Treasurer delivers the financial report and answers any questions first. The financial report should come early in the meeting, just in case the meeting has to decide on spending elsewhere in the agenda and needs to know the background.

If there's a report from the Executive Director (ED) it comes in next. This is the opportunity for the committee and the staff to communicate. The ED reports on background to the organization's activities, for information only. If the issues involve any decisions from the meeting then they should be given their own place in the agenda and voted on separately.

If there are sub-committees, their reports should be represented now. The committees report on their activities and bring recommendations and proposals to the full meeting.

### **Conduct Business**

After the meeting has received the background, it can consider the items that need to be decided. Each item should have its own section in the previously circulated agenda. Ideally, there should be a supporting paper for each issue, and recommendations for further action. Any motions or amendments should also be in writing. This is not only for the convenience of the Secretary but so that it can be shown that decisions have been made according to the rules in case there is any argument later. For this reason, decisions should be made in the form of motions even when everybody agrees on them and there's no need for a vote.

If there is a lot of routine business, consider having a consent agenda – that is, routine motions (such as to accept committee reports or approve expenditure) that will be carried automatically unless someone asks the Chair to move any of them to the regular agenda. This allows the meeting to concentrate on issues that are either important, or new, or both. Consent agenda items should be separated into their own section or marked with an asterisk to make sure their status is clear.

Some important but complicated issues – say, a re-examination of the organization's mission statement – don't belong on the agendas of regular meetings unless they come with reports or specific recommendations for action. This kind of issue is better handled at a special meeting (or a retreat)

where you can focus on this issue alone and talk through all its aspects without having to break away and take up other business.

After you've handled all the business on the circulated agenda, it's time to discuss any items that were brought up at the beginning of the meeting without notice, bearing in mind that if anybody wants more time to consider things you will probably need to put the question on the agenda of the next meeting.

## Rules for Meetings

Just as the object of a game gives direction to its players, four principles of a democratic meeting guide group members when they gather:

1. Every member has rights equal to every other member.
2. The will of the majority must be carried out.
3. The minority must be heard, and its rights protected.
4. Only one topic will be considered at a time.

"Parliamentary procedure" is a set of rules for meetings which ensures that the traditional principles of equality, harmony and efficiency are kept.

The saying "rules are meant to be broken" implies that no rules are perfect. The parliamentary rules used in government provide guidance for a body of hundreds of people meeting daily for months with a great volume of business to conduct. These same rules are not appropriate for all organizations. Too much formality in a meeting will frustrate and discourage members when the proceedings "bog down". Likewise, an absence of structure can mean nothing gets done and leave members feeling like they are wasting their time. Parliamentary rules for meetings are intended to help the group conduct its business (fairly and efficiently), not hinder it.

Every organization should examine standard parliamentary rules, then interpret and adapt them to its own use. If group members agree that the rules they've developed permit a majority to accomplish the organization's ultimate purpose within a reasonable period of time, while allowing the minority a reasonable opportunity to express its views, then those rules are appropriate.

## Satisfactory Conclusion

Always end on time and on a positive note so that people will feel that their contributions have been worthwhile. If there's a success to announce, bring it up here. Briefly review decisions and in particular the actions resulting from the discussions. Tell the meeting that the minutes will be distributed within a week as an aide to help them remember what they have agreed to do. Confirm the next meeting date and time to make sure everyone is able to attend. Finally, thank the meeting participants for taking part. Remember that as volunteers, they have made a serious investment of their time to support your organization and its cause.

## Part III Diagnosing Meeting ills and Working Toward a Cure

If your meetings aren't working, chances are your committee isn't either. Scan the following scenarios of common meeting "ills" and some suggested "remedies" for each. They may help to boost your organization's health.

### Scenario #1: The living noticeboard

In this meeting, agenda items are transformed into monologues usually spoken by one or more people in the organization. Program and financial reports of the previous month's activities seem to take up most if not all of the meeting. Generally, members arrive late and often have to rush off before the meeting is finished. Today the last agenda item, "Any Other Business," is a colleague's opportunity to bring up that new funding opportunity everyone wants to explore. Time runs out and the funding proposal has to be postponed yet again to next month's meeting. You leave the meeting feeling enormously frustrated and de-energized.

» **The diagnosis:** The main problem here is boredom, not lack of time but lack of interest – why keep the torture going? Attendees have realized that everything that is spoken at them in the meeting could just as easily have been sent to them in a printed or email document. People still attending "living noticeboard" meetings do so out of an underlying commitment to the organization and its mission – not because they feel they can make a meaningful contribution.

» **The remedies:** Review the rules for good meetings and put them into practice.

#### *Purpose*

We meet formally to productively exchange ideas and information, the results of which should be sound, collaboratively developed and collectively agreed upon decisions. Consequently, meeting agendas should only contain items that require meaningful input from the membership. Including "for information" items that don't relate to any items requiring a decision should be the exception, not the rule.

#### *Meeting preparation*

Background papers need to be circulated well before the meeting to allow people to read and reflect on their positions on the presented issues. The papers need to include:

- brief and well-structured reports that conclude with one or two recommendations. These will help focus the meeting on key issues and provides committee members with opportunities to make useful contributions.
- all other "information only" materials attached to particular agenda items.
- the agenda, which clearly states the purpose of the meeting and the expected outcomes of each agenda item.

#### *Timing is everything*

Structure the meeting and agenda so that participants deal with the most important matters first. This will encourage them to turn up on time. Estimate how long each agenda item will take and put the planned timing on the agenda. Ask a participant to keep track of time so that all agenda items are covered in the meeting with sufficient time for focused and informed discussion.

## Scenario #2: The serious bonding session

These meetings allow all participants to share their opinions on agenda items and in fact anything else of interest. Spleens are vented, and numerous good ideas are thrown into the ring. Everyone leaves the meeting feeling great. On reflection, however, you realize that no decisions have been made and nobody has taken or been allocated responsibility for any future action. The organization does not meet again until next month and the deadline for that new funding opportunity may already have passed.

» **The diagnosis:** These meetings are fun but lack focus. The organization finds it hard to move forward because no one has taken responsibility for any actions.

» **The remedies :** Encourage participants to engage with the meeting and take on personal responsibility for getting work done.

### *Leadership*

A skillful Chair is able to facilitate the meeting so that participants enjoy themselves and still achieve significant outcomes.

### *Encouraging ownership*

To broaden ownership of the meeting and increase the chances of meeting follow up, members can be given responsibility for individual agenda items. They can be asked to prepare background reading materials and lead the discussion for "their" agenda items. They should estimate how long their agenda item is likely to take and to record the expected outcomes of meeting discussion.

### *Recording responsibility*

Accurate meeting notes or minutes should record the ideas generated and the decisions made during the meeting. Most importantly, the minutes need to indicate who has agreed to do what before the next meeting or by when. At the end of the meeting, participants need to review each agenda item and confirm who is responsible for what.

The minutes should be written and circulated while the meeting details are still fresh in people's minds, preferably within a week of the meeting being held. A table summarizing the action resulting from the agenda and detailing people's responsibilities and timelines attached to the front of the minutes can be very useful for busy committee members.

Sometimes it can also be worthwhile to follow up progress with members between meetings. An offer of assistance or a word of encouragement can be enough to gently remind people of their agreed responsibilities.

### *Making time for pure fun*

Finally, social occasions need to be factored into the organization's calendar of events. They can make an invaluable contribution to your organization's morale and sense of belonging but they cannot be the reason or place for general meetings.

## Part IV Meeting Etiquette

Meeting etiquette is really just a matter of manners and common sense. However, it doesn't hurt to give some reminders. Here are the top 10:

1. **DON'T** arrive late or leave early.  
**DO** arrive on time (or early) and leave only when the meeting is finished.
2. **DON'T** make your first reading of the meeting agenda and supporting documents as you walk in the door.  
**DO** make a careful reading of all items well in advance of the meeting. Make note of the items you would like to speak to and what you plan to say.
3. **DON'T** make personal attacks or rehash issues that have already been decided.  
**DO** learn how to accept committee decisions graciously, even if your view has been overruled.
4. **DON'T** launch into discussions about irrelevant information.  
**DO** stick to the agenda.
5. **DON'T** agree to decisions or action you don't understand.  
**DO** ask questions and insist on answers when you need clarification.
6. **DON'T** ignore potential or current conflicts of interest that you think have arisen or may arise in the future.  
**DO** take appropriate action to ensure you and your Committee are protected from possible or real conflicts.
7. **DON'T** speak without listening or interrupt people when they are talking.  
**DO** ensure you give the views of each committee member respect and consideration.
8. **DON'T** underrate the contribution you can make – or the contribution you SHOULD make during meetings.  
**DO** attempt to make an active contribution to debates and discussions.
9. **DON'T** assume knowledge.  
**DO** answer any questions meeting participants ask, even if they appear naïve.
10. **DON'T** discuss confidential information outside the committee room.  
**DO** respect all confidences afforded to you in your role.



## Part V Tips for the Chair

Being a good Chair requires not taking over the meeting, but facilitating discussion. This means creating an atmosphere where committee members can debate, struggle with issues, reach compromise and at times to agree to disagree. Here are some tips to set you on the right path.

### **TIP 1: Define the purpose**

The key to successfully chairing a meeting is to be absolutely clear about the purpose of the meeting. Once the meeting task is understood, it becomes easier to make the other decisions that may arise. Knowing the purpose of a meeting requires some thinking to be made about priorities and clarification of what decisions need to be made, and by when – so the Chair needs to know the meeting agenda well before the meeting starts.

### **TIP 2: Clarify the rules**

Ensure that everyone knows the rules of the meeting. Will decisions be made through consensus or will a formal voting procedure be followed? Whichever style of meeting is chosen and agreed upon, it is the Chair's job to maintain consistency throughout the meeting.

### **TIP 3: Switch into neutral**

As a Chair you must remain neutral at all times. If there is an item on the agenda about which you feel strongly, ask someone else to take the Chair for that agenda item so that you are able to participate more freely in the debate. Introduce each agenda item with a brief summary of the background to the item and then quickly pass on to someone else.

### **TIP 4: Deal with diversity**

Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak. Not everyone feels equally comfortable speaking in meetings so as the Chair, you have to work to ensure that those who don't jump in or speak quickly to issues are heard. Some of the factors that impact people's willingness to speak publicly include gender, age, disability, cultural or linguistic background and experience in the organization. Deal with diversity with patience and the committee will reap the benefits.

### **TIP 5: Keep your hands firmly on the reins**

Be democratic but stay in control. If someone else wants to dominate or divert the agenda and is derailing a meeting it is up to the Chair to bring them to order. This scenario has less chance of becoming personal and destructive if you can keep the meeting focused on the task at hand.

No matter how rattled you may feel inside, keep the purpose at the forefront of your mind. Drop your shoulders, breathe evenly and speak in a calm, low voice. Try using the following:

*"I appreciate your concerns, Lee. Time is short for this agenda item, let's return to the issue for discussion which is ..."*

Or

*"I'm afraid, David, your issues are not able to be covered by this meeting. We have to move on to the next item/come to some resolution on this item. I will call you later this week to work out the most appropriate ways to deal with your concerns."*

Acknowledge the interjector by name, be polite and show that you are listening, do not put them down.

### **TIP 6: The art of communication**

As mentioned, the Chair should acknowledge all members by name. A good Chair practices active listening and is able to acknowledge speakers with appropriate facial gestures and clarify or summarize their points when necessary.

### **TIP 7: Breaking a deadlock**

When a topic has been fully discussed, the Chair should summarize the main points and put the item to the meeting for a decision or a vote. If as the Chair you feel that an item is far more complex than previously thought, do not just let it run over time. You have three possible ways to go. You can:

- Extend the time for this item,
- Refer the item to a working group for a report at the next meeting, or
- Set up an extraordinary meeting of the entire committee to deal with the item.

Whichever option you decide to take you will need to stop the discussion on the agenda item, summarize what has happened and ask approval from the meeting to carry out your option. If the item is causing too much "heat" without progressing, it is probably wise to choose one of the last two options to give people enough time to gather their thoughts.