

Tips for Effective Meetings

When Good Meetings Go Bad (and tips to make them good again)



Neutrality

As a facilitator, your role is to increase your committee's effectiveness and promote the members' full participation by maintaining the process or rules by which the meetings are run. Facilitators need to be careful about acting and speaking in a neutral manner to encourage full participation from the group. Your role is to think about what is best for the whole group.

Common pitfalls:

- Perception that the facilitator represents one side of an issue.
Solution: Maintain neutrality, and if you can't, then let someone else facilitate that portion of the meeting.
- Perception that the process is more favorable to one group/side.
Solution: Ensure all points of view are being acknowledged. Ask "Are there any other comments or questions?". Ensure all members have access to written materials.

Ensuring Full Participation

In order for any committee to be most effective, there needs to be full participation from the group. Multiple perspectives and opinions can help members to brainstorm better solutions to issues.

Common pitfalls:

- A few members monopolize the discussion.
Solution: Tell the group you would like to hear from everyone at least once before hearing from others a second (or third) time. Thank the vocal members and let him/her know that you would like to hear from some others.
- Many members do not contribute to the discussion.

Solution: Encourage members who have not contributed by asking them directly, “Sarah, what do you think?”. Make a general statement, “There are a number of you who have not said anything—does anyone else have any thoughts on this issue?”

- Members do not have information/knowledge about the issue or topic.

Solution: Ensure that members receive information prior to the meeting (it’s difficult to discuss an issue when the information is received at the meeting). Summarize the issue at the beginning of the meeting.

Controlling the Discussion: Focus, Timing, Control

Most committees have many issues to discuss at their meetings. It can be a challenge to keep members focused on a particular issue. On the other hand, it can be just as challenging to know when to end discussion and move onto another issue.

Common pitfalls:

- Wandering away from the agenda and issues.

Solution: “I am not sure I understand—can you explain how this relates to the topic/issues?”. Thank the person and move onto the next comment.

- An issue is being discussed for too long and members are getting restless.

Solution: Summarize frequently and ask members if they have any additional comments. Watch and listen for signs that the group is in agreement to end discussion. Suggest that the issue be broken into smaller pieces for discussion or be tabled for another meeting.

- The discussion is very heated and tense.

Solution: Use neutral language to reframe a participant’s suggestion or comment. When a member makes claims about an issue, ask her/him to back up their claims—“Do you have evidence of that?”. Ask how many other members feel “this way.” Suggest a break or table the issue for another meeting.

Another Hint—use your Recorder! Have the Recorder read back from the minutes to refresh members on what is being discussed.

Voting

Voting can be useful in establishing where a committee stands on a particular issue.

Common pitfalls:

- Voting procedures are not clear to the members.

Solution: Make sure by-laws and other rules governing voting are clear and understood by everyone.

One Last Tip

Always Refer to the Group! Be sure to ask the committee how it feels and what it wants to do. It is important to give the members the opportunity to weigh in on issues, whether substantive or process oriented. This can be very helpful to you, too.

When discussions become muddled, tense, or go on for too long, you can refer back to previous decisions made by the committee: *“Remember when we voted on that?”* or *“Didn’t I hear that the committee wanted to move onto another issue?”*. By doing this, you acknowledge the committee’s power of decision making, strengthen your role as chair (and their support of you as chair), and develop a clear picture of where the committee stands on various issues.