

HOW TO RUN A GOOD MEETING: A GUIDE FOR NEW LEADERS

**CENTER FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE
1000 WISCONSIN AVENUE, NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20007**

A Good Meeting is a wonderful, rare thing. Brief to the point, interesting, everyone has a chance to have his or her say and no one dominates. You leave it thinking, "I wish there were more meetings like THAT one in my life." You know that you were important in that meeting and that meeting was important to you!

Why is a Good Meeting so rare? It is because, like anything, it takes work to make a good one and lots of practice and a little art to make a truly great one. But since all community groups are built on an endless stream of meetings, it's important to make them good. Whether we are talking about a Candidates' Night where 500 people are expected or a board meeting for 15, there are certain basic guidelines that should help improve your meetings.

1. **Understand that a meeting is the middle of a process of preparation and follow-up.** The worst meeting requires some kind of follow-up. Every minute of preparation and planning is well spent. In fact, in basic community organizer training, we say that each minute of meeting time should have an equal amount of time spent on preparation and debriefing. Preparation should include everyone who'll take a leading part in a meeting and should anticipate what might happen and plan for these "what-ifs." Don't overplan. But if you can eliminate surprises in advance, you can deal with the business of the meeting more efficiently.
2. **Start on time.** This is a courtesy to those who bothered to get there at the advertised time and sets a tone from the start that your group means business. It also creates a good habit.
3. **Start with introductions,** which will help people--especially new people—know who is at the meeting. Even old members may not remember each other's names--use nametags if you can. If it is a big public meeting, introduce the group's speakers and leaders. Try group introductions--"Would all those from Building #1 please stand? Now Building 2." The purpose is to get people to feel comfortable and involved.

If it's a small meeting, this might be the time to get a sense of the group on some important issue: "Please tell us who you are, what group you represent, and whether your group has a vacant building on your block." This is also a good time to get people talking about the group. Start a board meeting by asking for names and for a sentence on what Citizens for Change means to you. It will put the argument over copier paper in a different context.

Certainly get a sign-up sheet with everyone's name, address and phone number clearly printed. Follow-up is easier if you know who was there. It can also help people feel that their presence is noted and important.

4. **Review the agenda.** Every meeting--even an impromptu meeting among a handful of people--should have an agenda. Everyone should have a copy or the agenda should be written on a chalkboard. An agenda keeps a meeting focused and allows the chair to stop an unrelated discussion. The key is making sure everyone has an opportunity to influence and approve the agenda before you start. Simply go through it step-by-step and ask if anyone has additions.
5. **Make sure each person has an opportunity to participate.** If you don't plan for this, folks will either break in and disrupt the proceedings, or will leave feeling that they were merely spectators. This will make them much less likely to come to the next meeting. Have a time when people can "testify" about the problem by talking about their experiences -and/or discussing possible solutions. However you accomplish it, plan for people to participate.
6. **Set an ending time, and stick to it.** A road seems longer if you don't know when it will end. If we've agreed to meet for 90 minutes. I know we're halfway done after 45. If, after an hour and 10 minutes we've still got two topics to cover, this is the time to ask the group what they want to do: add a specific amount of time to the meeting? Or take up one or both items at another time?
7. **Make some rules, and keep to them.** General Roberts, who "wrote the book" on the rules of order, explained that to make a meeting effective, "it is necessary to restrain the individual somewhat, as the right of an individual...to do what he pleases, is incompatible with the interests of the whole. Where there is no law, but every man does what is right in his own eyes, there is the least of real liberty. "

Understand that a rule which is not followed once loses its force. The best example of this is the quorum. A group with a specific number of members like a board sets a quorum to prevent a small, unrepresentative portion of its members doesn't end up making the decisions. The exact number may vary, but it should be set and adhered to. If your group can't get a quorum, don't change the number, get better board members who will care enough to attend.

Another rule you could set would be letting folks who have-not yet spoken speak first. For a large group, you may need to insist that a person be recognized by the chair before speaking. Without this rule, a few assertive people may dominate the conversation.

8. **Chair the meeting.** When done right, this is work. It involves listening closely to those who are talking and being aware of those who are being silent. It requires the self-control to stay out of a discussion on the merits of the topic and the boldness to interrupt the speech-maker if his or her time is up. And it takes the ability to understand and summarize a discussion.

Use the tools of the chair--remind people of the agenda. bang the gavel when side conversation is distracting, watch the clock and most of all be active. It's a good idea to bang the gavel or interrupt a speaker at some point early in the meeting just to get everyone used to your doing it--it'll come in handy later.

Chairs don't make decisions--they just make sure decisions get made. Chairs do not control the outcome of the meeting, but they are responsible for ensuring that the meeting has an outcome that everyone understands clearly.

9. **Finish one thing, then move on to the next.** A meeting that jumps around makes people jumpy. The chair should summarize the outcome of item 3, then move the meeting on to item 4. It is certainly possible to decide not to decide yet, but that should be made clear as well.

There are only three possible actions you can take on any topic up for a decision: adopt the proposal, reject the proposal or decide at another time. If it is adopted, it should be made clear who is responsible for carrying it out and when. If the answer is no, this should be clearly understood. If there needs to be more work before a decision, the chair should get the group to define what is needed and decide who is going to do that work.

10. **Get a specific response if your meeting has a target**--an outsider who you're trying to get to do something. Give them a chance to say yes or no to your requests. Recently a group of tenants met with the Housing Authority director. Their group was very new and so was their organizer. They pressed hard, told their story, complained loudly--and then moved on to the next item. They never asked for, nor did they receive, a response. They left very frustrated and the officials got off the hook. The chairwoman should have stopped after each specific request and asked the director for an answer. The organizer should have made sure this happened.
11. **End with a review of the decisions reached and assignments made.** It's a good idea to keep track of tasks and decisions as you go along, listing the task, the person who will do it and the date for completion, then copy this and pass it out to those with assignments.
12. **Set up the next meeting before you leave.** This should be the last item on any agenda. It gives everyone a sense of continuity and makes deadlines easier to set.

It's also infinitely easier to figure out a good meeting time when everybody's present instead of over the phone.

13. **Give people a parting shot.** One leader I worked with ended board meetings with "last call"-- she asked each person if they had "anything else?" She waited for each person to either speak or say "nothing tonight." Nobody left dissatisfied or feeling he/she hadn't had his say.
14. **Keep your sense of humor.** We're in a serious business and there's plenty to be serious about. But don't miss an opportunity to laugh together. A chair can put a small group at ease and get the support of a big group with a light touch.

A truly great meeting leaves nobody wondering, "Was this meeting really necessary?" Everyone understands that there is strength in the group and wisdom in working together that could not be achieved by working in isolation. Like any work of art, great meetings are a combination of inspiration and perspiration.