



## **Meeting Skills**

### **What is in this guide**

1. What do we use meetings for?
2. Important things to know about meetings
  - a. Purpose of meetings
  - b. Different types of meetings
3. How to plan a meeting
  - a. Notification
  - b. Preparing the agenda
4. How to run a meeting
  - a. The agenda
  - b. Meeting procedures
  - c. How to take decisions in meetings
  - d. How to chair the meeting
  - e. How to write minutes

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## **1. What do we use meetings for?**

Meetings are very important for the work of any organisation. Good meetings are important for collective decision-making, planning and follow-up, accountability, democracy, and other practices that will help you to build a good organisation. If meetings are used in the correct way, they can help an organisation to be efficient. However, like all organising tools, meetings can be used badly and end up not serving the purpose that they are supposed to. Sometimes we seem to attend too many long meetings, which discuss the same thing over and over again without seeming to move forward. Meetings can become places where conflict is played out. Some people can also see attending meetings as working for the organisation instead of seeing it as a tool for getting work done. We should try to make our meetings places where we get democratic and constructive participation and involvement from our members.

## **2. Important things to know about meetings**

### **The purpose of meetings**

Most people do not like attending meetings – especially if they are not sure what the purpose of the meeting is, or if it goes on too long and achieves too little. Meetings must not be too frequent or held just for the sake of it. There must be a need for a meeting. There should be decisions about the different types of meetings needed. For example, some meetings could be to discuss policy and others to discuss organisation (practical work).

Wherever possible the members must know what type of meeting they are going to and what the meeting is for – in other words, the PURPOSE of the meeting. Sometimes an organisation might call a special or extraordinary meeting.

There are different types of meetings and planning and it should take account of this.

### **Different types of meetings**

Most organisations will hold the following types of meetings:

- 1. The general members meeting:**

This is the most common meeting, which usually happens once a month or once every two weeks. The general members meeting should be the

place where members are informed of developments, involved in decisions and given education and information that will help them to become more active in the organisation. General meetings are usually the places where decisions are made and where the executive reports on work they and other sub-committees have done.

2. **Special meetings:**

These can be called to discuss specific issues, for example preparing for a national conference or work on planning activities for the year. Any members who are interested should be invited to attend special meetings. They should not be run like general members meetings (with minutes, reports etc) but should only focus on the issues they've been called to discuss.

3. **Executive meetings:**

The executive should meet more regularly than the general members, and executive meetings should have a more business-like focus. The executive has to plan implementation for the organisation, monitor the work that has been done, deal with problems, and often (if you're part of a larger organisation) relate to other levels of the organisation. They should discuss correspondence in detail and address problems as they come up. The executive should also keep an eye on the finances of the organisation and monitor income and expenditure. Every executive meeting should have an item on the agenda that plans for the next general members meeting. They should provide both leadership and administration to the organisation.

4. **Annual General Meeting:**

Most organisations have an Annual General Meeting laid down in their constitution. The AGM is the place where the executive accounts to all members about the activities of the year as well as the finances of the organisation. The AGM is also the place where new leaders are elected and are given a mandate to run the organisation for another year. Most AGM's need at least the following two detailed reports to the members:

- The secretary's report that lists plans of the organisation, the actual activities that took place that year, the achievements of the year, and the problems experienced.
- The treasurer's report: a detailed financial report that lists all income from subscriptions, grants, donations, fundraising; and all expenditure. This report should also clearly state what the balance is and where that

balance is held. It is important to have a written financial report at your AGM but very often members find financial reports difficult to understand and you should try and make it simpler by putting the main headings on news-prints and explaining it to people in less financial language.

### **3. Planning a meeting**

Planning should improve participation by ensuring that discussion is on a single topic and that the members are well prepared for the meeting. This is the responsibility of the Chairperson, Secretary and Executive, depending on the type of organisation.

Planning does not mean controlling and directing the meeting in such a way that it restricts participation

Planning should include the following:

**Notification:** It is the executive's responsibility to ensure that everyone has been notified of the date, time and venue of the meeting, as well as the main issues to be discussed. For many organisations it is a useful practice to always have their meetings on the same day at the same time in the same place – for example on the first Saturday of every month at the local church hall. If you do not have money to always inform your members of meetings then over time this will help you to cut costs, and to make sure that everyone knows where they can find the meeting.

**Preparing the agenda:** The agenda is a list of the most important issues for the members to discuss. It is drawn from the Matters Arising from the previous meeting and from the discussions of the Executive or Secretariat.

The agenda is the responsibility of the Chairperson and the Secretary. The chairperson should read the minutes of the previous meeting to familiarise him/herself with the issues. This will form the basis of a list of matters arising from these minutes.

Matters arising include:

Tasks – a report back must be given

Matters for which further information was required for discussion

Matters that were deferred to this meeting

There are standard items for any agenda. These items should be arranged in order of priority and time should be allocated for each discussion. Where possible, try to familiarise yourself with each area of discussion.

An agenda should include a last item known as General or Any Other Business to allow individuals to raise short items not included on the agenda.

#### **4. How to run a meeting**

##### **a. The agenda**

Open the meeting and welcome everyone. Then go through the agenda step by step.

Those present and apologies: The apologies of those members not able to attend the meeting are recorded as part of the minutes. Send round an attendance register if there are too many people to just record it in the minutes. Ask if there are any apologies from people who are not there.

Minutes: Minutes are accurate notes of what is discussed and decided on at meetings. Make sure that the minutes of the previous meeting are circulated to everyone or at least read at the beginning of the meeting. (See section on writing minutes) Minutes must be adopted at the beginning of a meeting. Give people a chance to read the minutes or read them out aloud. Everyone must agree that they are an accurate record of the last meeting. Members must be given the chance to add where item/points might have been left out.

Matters arising from the minutes: This covers points that were discussed at the last meeting, when perhaps someone was asked to do some work or there have been subsequent developments, which now need discussion. A list of these points is drawn from the previous meeting's minutes.

Correspondence: This means all the letters that have been received by the organisation since the last meeting. They can be dealt with in different ways. If your group does not receive many letters, they could be read out and then discussed. Another way is for the secretary to list them with a brief explanation. The chairperson then goes through the list and suggests action. If the issue raised in the letter needs decisive action it can be more fully discussed.

Other items on the agenda: Someone must introduce each item on the agenda. The item introduced could be either a discussion or a report.

If it is a discussion someone is given the job of leading the discussion and making proposals on that particular item.

If it is a report, the person who is reporting should comment on the following:

Was it a task that was completed, what were the problems and what still needs to be done? (issue, facts, options, proposal – see guide on inputs and verbal reports)

Discussion should be to examine a problem or discuss an issue in more detail – get everyone’s ideas and points of view on it, arrive at a decision, delegate responsibility for the completion of the task, and follow-up to ensure that it is completed.

### **b. Meeting Procedures**

All members should know meeting procedures. There are a number of points that people use in meetings to ensure that the meetings run smoothly. Often members use these points to assist the chairperson.

The following are procedural points most used in meetings:

#### **Point of Order:**

It should be used when a member feels that the meeting procedure is not being stuck to and s/he wants the meeting to return to the correct procedure or order. For example, when an individual is speaking totally off the point, another member might ask on a point of order for the speaker to stick to the agenda.

#### **Point of Information:**

A member may raise their hand and ask to make point of information (or request information) when it is not his or her turn to speak. This can enable a member to speak (by putting up his/her hand and asking to speak) when it is not his/her turn to request more information on the matter being discussed, or to give more information on a point being discussed.

#### **Out of Order:**

When an individual is not sticking to meeting procedure, being rude, interjecting or misbehaving in some way, the chairperson might rule him/her out of order.

**Protection:**

A speaker who is being harassed when he/she is speaking can ask for the protection of the Chairperson.

**Quorums:**

This is the minimum number of people who must be present for the meeting to conduct business and take decisions. This minimum number is stated in the organisations constitution. The meeting cannot start until there is a quorum. Always ensure that you have this minimum number of people at a meeting, especially when decisions must be taken. If you do not, and decisions are taken, members who were not present can request that it is re-discussed, meaning that time was wasted.

All these points are called meeting rules or procedures, which are there to try to make meetings more efficient and effective. They should not be over-used just for the sake of it.

**c. How to take decisions in meetings**

Decisions are usually reached through two main ways:

- **Consensus**

This means reaching decisions by discussion and general agreement.

- **Voting**

People vote for a particular proposal. Usually one person will put forward a proposal, someone else will second it and then people will vote. If the majority of people accept the proposal, it then becomes binding on the organisation.

Voting can either be done by a show of hands or secret ballot.

**Show of hand**

The Chairperson would call for a show of hand when there is a difference of opinion amongst members when a decision needs to be reached. S/he will call on members to raise their hands to show their support for or against a proposal.

These votes are then counted – majority would then ensure that the proposal stands or falls away.

## **Secret ballot**

Each person would be given a piece of paper where s/he would write whether s/he supports a particular proposal or not. The votes would be counted and the majority would ensure that the proposal stands or falls away.

It is usually better to reach consensus than to vote. Reaching consensus often means that there are compromises from everyone but it ensures that most people feel part of the decision. Sometimes a vote does need to be taken, for example in elections or when the meeting cannot reach a decision through consensus.

## **Resolutions**

These are formal proposals put forward to the meeting, for people to agree or disagree with. If some disagree, they are voted on. If passed, they become resolutions and therefore policy of the organisation. There should be a proposer and seconder of each resolution.

Resolutions are a clear way to set out the policies and decisions of an organisation. Usually a resolution has three parts to it:

We start the resolution by saying that, eg: *"The AGM of the Natalspruit Women's Organisation, meeting on (give date) notes that:* and then you list the main issues that you are concerned about, for example:

*Noting:*

- 1. the rapid increase in crime in this area,*
- 2. the devastating effects it has on the lives of people in this area,*
- 3. etc.*

The second part of the resolution will then list the points that show your understanding of the issue and its causes, for example:

*Believing:*

- 1. that the increase in crime is due to the failure of police to effectively service our community*
- 2. that the high unemployment rate is forcing many of our young people to take up crime as a way of life*

### 3. *etc*

The third part lists exactly what your organisation has decided to do or what its policy should be on the issue, for example:

*Therefore resolves:*

1. *to actively participate in the community police forum*
2. *to use all means possible to pressurise the police to perform their duty*
3. *to work with the local council to ensure that facilities and clubs are supplied to keep our youth off the street*
4. *etc*

Amendments may need to be made to resolutions, and these should be accepted by everyone present. If there is not total agreement on an amendment, a vote should be held and the chairperson should record the votes of those for, and those against, the amendment, as well as those abstaining. If the majority support the amendment it stands and the original section of the resolution falls away.

The Chairperson and members must study the constitution of the organisation to make sure they know and understand all these procedures.

#### **d. How to chair the meeting**

The chairperson is the most important person in the meeting. He or she will set the pace for the meeting, make sure that people stick to the topics, ensure that democratic decisions are taken, and that everyone is on board with these decisions. Chairing is a great skill and it is important to teach members to chair meetings and rotate the job where possible so that more people can practise this skill. However, it is always good to have an experienced chairperson for important meetings.

A good chairperson is an active chairperson; it is not the chairperson's job to simply keep a list of speakers and to let them speak one after the other. The chairperson should introduce the topic clearly and guide the discussion especially when people start repeating points. When a discussion throws up opposing views, the chairperson should also try to summarise the different positions and where possible, propose a way forward. The way forward can involve taking a vote on an issue, having a further discussion at another date, or making a compromise that most people may agree with. The chairperson

should ask for agreement from the meeting on the way forward, and apologise to those who still wanted to speak.

Here are the basic steps for chairing a meeting:

- The Chairperson opens the meeting and presents the agenda.
- S/he should start a meeting by setting a cut-off time when everyone agrees that the meeting should end. This helps to encourage people to be brief.
- S/he calls on individuals to introduce or lead the discussion of points on the agenda and gives everyone a chance to speak.
- S/he also ensures that no one dominates discussion.
- S/he should try to summarise the discussion clearly restating ideas and proposals put forward. However, there is no need to repeat everything that has been said.
- S/he must be able to get agreement on what the decision is – s/he must ensure that everyone understands the decision, delegates to someone the duty of carrying out the decision, ensures that the person given the responsibility knows what s/he has to do and when it should be done and reported on.
- S/he ensures that everyone takes part in the discussions and decision-making.
- S/he ensures that the date for the next meeting is always set at the meeting.

#### **d. How to write minutes in the meeting**

It is essential that minutes are recorded accurately. This not only serves as a reminder of issues that need to be followed up but also prevents arguments about previous decisions. Minutes are also a guide for the secretary and chairperson when drawing up the agenda for the next meeting.

Minutes help the organisation to learn from its past failures and successes. This is done when the secretary reflects on the minutes of the past year when drawing up an annual report.

There are three aspects to taking good minutes:

## **1. Listening**

This is a very important skill to develop. You must not only listen to what is being said but you have to ensure that you understand as well.

## **2. Taking notes**

Write down only the main points and the decisions taken. It is impossible to write down everything that is being said.

- Always try to identify the main points

What is the main aim of the discussion?

What information is important?

Use your own words. If you do this you will find that your minutes are more accurate and complete than if you try to jot down everything a speaker says.

- Pay special attention to decisions. If necessary, ask for the decisions to be repeated.
- Ask for clarification. Do not hesitate to stop the meeting if you are not clear about any decisions or issues being discussed.

## **3. Writing the minutes**

The following information should be included:

- Nature of meeting, date, time, venue
- Names of those present
- Names of visitors
- Apologies
- Summaries of decisions and discussions

This includes work to be followed up and who have taken responsibility for certain tasks. The minutes should be written neatly in a special minute book or file; avoid jotting down minutes on scraps of paper. The book or file should be kept safely and always available for consultation at any time.