



## Conducting Effective Meetings

Last verified: 2010-10-06

When members of a company gather at a meeting, their purpose is to conduct business to collect information and discuss issues and to make decisions on how these issues will be resolved or addressed. The methods businesses choose to carry out these functions will frequently depend on the type and size of the meeting.

For example, at an annual general meeting, there will normally be a large number in attendance in a large room and discussion will focus on performance of the business during the previous year.

A board, executive or committee meeting will have fewer attending; participants will be sitting at a table, and policies and operational issues will be under discussion.

Careful planning and preparation are essential to conducting effective meetings, regardless of type or size.

The purpose of this fact sheet is to discuss five components that are essential to conducting effective meetings. These components are:

1. [Chairperson](#)
2. [Agenda](#)
3. [Decision Making](#)
4. [Group Discussions](#)
5. [Physical Set-Up](#)

### 1. Chairperson

The meeting chairperson should be carefully chosen. The chairperson is responsible for providing leadership to the meeting, should be familiar with parliamentary procedure and set an example by consistently conforming to it. As the leader of the meeting, he/she must understand the bylaws and policies of the business, the goals and purpose of the meeting, and he/she must know the participants and motivate them to contribute. The chairperson also has the power to maintain control of the meeting, should any questions about procedure arise or conflicts occur.

The chairperson plays the following important roles:

*Helps those attending the meeting to participate*

Determines the skills and abilities of participants, involves and motivates them in the activities that have been designated to them, checks on their progress and provides guidance and assistance.

*Plans ahead*

Assesses the items of business that need to be addressed by the meeting, decides on the options available and then chooses the best option that will complete the task.

*Prepares for meetings*

Plans the agenda with the assistance of the secretary and other officers as required and checks on all meeting arrangements.

*Presides at meetings*

Presents the rules of order for approval by the meeting, follows the agenda, involves participants in the discussion and ensures that order is maintained.

*Evaluates meetings*

Evaluates every meeting to ensure that its objectives have been met.

**2. Agenda**

An agenda is a list of the items of business to be covered in a meeting. The agenda helps a meeting remain focused, and reduces the possibility of items of business being overlooked or forgotten. Agendas should always be available for distribution at the meeting.

The following agenda outline is often used:

1. Call to order
2. Approval of the agenda
3. Reading and approval of minutes of the last meeting
4. Officers' reports, i.e. president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer
5. Committee reports
6. Unfinished or postponed business
7. New business
8. Adjournment

Those invited to a meeting should receive a tentative agenda a few days in advance. The notice period is often determined by the by-laws of the business. Advance notice assists participants by:

- reminding them of the meeting;
- ensuring that important items of business have not been overlooked;
- helping them identify important items and be prepared to discuss them; and
- helping them focus on issues at the meeting.

### **3. Decision Making**

At meetings, reaching decisions can be complex and challenging. It is important that participants who wish to speak and express their views have an opportunity to do so. It also is important to proceed carefully, listen to concerns and opinions, and consider alternatives. Thus, when a decision has been made, it is more likely that a larger majority of participants will accept and support it because they have been involved in its creation. When decisions are made too quickly, there is a good chance that someone and his/her views have been left out.

The following process can be used to organize decision making:

1. Define the issue. State it clearly and in writing if necessary.
2. Gather all information relevant to the issue. All pertinent facts and ideas need to be known and meeting participants and the chairperson must distinguish between facts and opinions. A decision may need to be deferred so that additional information can be gathered.
3. List all possible solutions or actions. Encourage discussion to generate new ideas and alternatives.
4. Choose the best possible solution. Use the process of elimination to refine and combine the list in step 3.
5. Make the decision. Formulate a motion which is a formal proposal for action or decision by a meeting, vote on it and then record the results.
6. Evaluate the outcome. This is usually done once a decision has been implemented and can be handled through general discussion or preparation of a written report.

Most meetings use some form of procedure to guide them and to ensure that the traditional principles of a democratic meeting are maintained. These principles are:

- every participant has rights equal to every other participant;
- the will of the majority is carried out;
- the minority is heard, its rights protected; and
- only one topic is considered at a time.

### **4. Group Discussions**

Well managed meetings allow all participants to be part of the decision making process. Following are some techniques that the chairperson can use to encourage and support participation and discussion:

#### *The chairperson solicits views*

The chairperson might suggest that comments are welcome from the group and ask specific individuals to share their views. Participants thus hear a number of abbreviated opinions rather than listening to one or two long speeches.

### *A survey*

After a short discussion, the chairperson asks for a quick show of hands to determine support for proposed ideas. This should help the chairperson determine how to proceed. This encourages participants to express an opinion.

### *Groups*

Groups can be very useful in the decision making process at large meetings and for generating new ideas from participants. The meeting divides into smaller groups, i.e. four to eight people, for a short time to discuss assigned issues. A person is chosen as a recorder to list the conclusions of the group. The groups then report their ideas to the entire meeting. The alternatives that are generated will assist the meeting in resolving issues and making decisions acceptable to all.

### *Brainstorming*

This is a procedure for generating many spontaneous and diverse ideas which can help to develop alternatives that will assist in resolving the issue being discussed and in coming to a decision. Guidelines for brainstorming are:

- don't criticize the ideas of others while brainstorming;
- impractical suggestions may trigger practical ideas among other participants;
- the more ideas, the greater the chance of developing a very good idea;
- build on the ideas of others, improve on a previous idea or combine several ideas into one;
- choose one person to record all ideas on a flipchart so that everyone can see them and a record exists; and
- after a brainstorming session, critically screen the list of ideas for four or five consistent items or themes. Also, if brainstorming has been done in smaller groups, identify similar issues from the lists of individual groups. Finally, develop this "short list" of ideas into options for decisions.

### *Conflict*

Conflict can arise in meeting discussions. Many assume that conflict is negative but it can be positive if it leads to innovation, positive change or agreement when discussing an issue. It is important to remember that disagreement is necessary to the process of group decision making. The chairperson may have to step into resolving conflict in a meeting in order to reach an acceptable decision. Following are steps that are useful in resolving conflict:

- Recognize that there is conflict and identify the issue causing the disagreement.
- Collect all information relating to the conflict, share it and assess it.
- Propose possible solutions, including the consequences of the proposals.
- Find a mutually acceptable resolution without coercion.
- Carry out the agreement and evaluate its effectiveness, with all parties sharing in the evaluation.

If a meeting does get out of hand, take a short break. When the meeting reconvenes, the chairperson can summarize the discussion up to the point of conflict or have opposing sides summarize their respective positions. The chairperson can then attempt to lead the two opposing sides in negotiating a solution.

### **5. Physical Set-Up**

Physical location and surroundings are very important to a productive meeting. The number of people attending the meeting will have to be taken into consideration. For example, for an annual general meeting where there will be a large number of people attending, it might be useful to have a microphone located in the centre of the room so that when people address the meeting, everyone in attendance can hear.

Audio visual equipment can enhance a presentation and clarify information that is being presented to a meeting. The type of audio visual equipment required to make presentations needs to be considered in advance and, once again, the size of room and number of people attending the meeting are essential in planning. For a large room with many people attending, the screen will have to be located at a height where all participants can see it.

The length and time of the meeting should always be considered. If participants are traveling a long distance, it may be necessary to schedule the starting and concluding times to allow for travel to and from the meeting. It is also important that arrangements be made in advance for breaks. Breaks can enhance a meeting by providing participants the opportunity to meet on an informal basis and discuss issues that they may not want to discuss with the entire group.

Other physical factors that contribute to a productive meeting include the following: proper lighting, size of room, acoustics, telephone, temperature, ventilation, comfort and position of seating, writing materials, restrooms, coat racks, parking, name tags, refreshments, extension cords and location of electrical outlets.

