

Chairing a Meeting

Why do meetings fail? Well, there may be reasons such as lack of time, a badly designed agenda or an unsatisfactory venue. However, if the chairman is doing his (or her) job, it should be possible to overcome these difficulties.

Chairing a meeting means ensuring that a meeting achieves its aims. The meeting should have been called for a specific purpose and all discussion at the meeting must be steered to this end. This may sound simple in theory but in practice it is a very demanding task. The skills required include:

Impartiality

A chairman is like a judge in a court. He should ensure that all participants have an opportunity to express their point of view. It can be difficult to leave your own opinions at home, but if you can't remain impartial, you shouldn't have taken the job.

Assertiveness

Ensuring that everyone gets a hearing will almost certainly involve stopping someone from dominating the proceedings. The more contentious the issue the more likely you are to require firmness. You don't need to be rude or dogmatic. Phrases such as "I think we should hear from Ms. Smith on this" or "can we have some comments from the engineering department on this" should be sufficient in most cases. Once you provide this opening, however, you need to ensure that there are no interruptions while the next speaker has their say.

Staying on course

How often have you seen an agenda left totally aside? The meeting starts off well but becomes embroiled in a particular topic (perhaps the first item on the agenda) and ends when time runs out. A Chairman must assess the importance of each item on the agenda, and allot time to each topic as required. If one issue begins to dominate the chairman must take control. You might suggest a further meeting to discuss the issue at a later date, or that the main parties concerned could continue the discussion at the end of the meeting. Sometimes it will be necessary to call for a decision and then move on to the next topic. You need to stay alert and make sure that the issue has been given an adequate and impartial hearing within the allotted time.

Summarizing

Summarizing can be used to end a topic, to end a discussion, to limit the need for discussion and at the end of a meeting to ensure that everyone has a clear overview of what took place or what action is now required. It is an invaluable skill for a chairman. Summarizing requires active listening. You have to state concisely what was said in an impartial way and end with a clear statement about what is expected to happen next. It takes practice to summarize well, but it is a skill well worth developing.

Many people feel that being a chairman means opening the meeting and stopping rows. There is much more to it than that. Prior to the meeting, a chairman should consult with the secretary regarding the agenda, ensure that all interested parties have been notified, assess the level of interest and the potential for divisiveness for each item, and allot time to each item, based on decisions required and number of people attending.

During the meeting, the chairman must focus on the decisions required of the meeting, ensure that all participants are accorded adequate time, decide when to end debate on each topic, use appropriate questions to elucidate information or re-direct discussion, listen carefully to all contributions, and clearly summarize proceedings with an emphasis on decisions taken and future plans.

The above are all key ingredients for a fruitful meeting. A tactful but assertive chairman will facilitate an effective meeting, and that's what everyone wants

Corporate Minutes

It is vital that all corporations keep adequate documentation in the form of minutes of shareholder and director meetings. In many jurisdictions, the absence of proper records may be a liability for the shareholders of a corporation, particularly in cases where the shareholders are directors themselves, or where they have close relationships to the corporate directors.

Most jurisdictions require corporations to hold annual shareholder's meetings to elect directors. Also, the bylaws of most corporations also require their board of directors to have an annual meeting. Although the board may delegate day-to-day operation of the business, the following actions normally require approval by the board of directors:

- Electing officers of the corporation
- Adopting business policies and plans,
- Designating committees and allocating authority to them
- Issuing and selling stock
- Approving the sale, lease, conveyance, exchange, transfer, or other disposition of all or substantially all corporate property and assets
- Approving mergers and reorganizations
- Approving the adoption of pension, profit-sharing, other employee benefit plans and stock-option plans
- Approving corporate borrowing and loans
- Entering into joint ventures.

The board generally should also approve the following types of transactions:

- Designating corporate bank accounts and authorized signatories
- Changing an officer's compensation (unless this has been expressly delegated)
- Entering into a major lease of premises
- Entering into any other major contractual agreement or venture

This list does not include all requirements, and some corporate actions require shareholder approval as well. Also, some jurisdictions have different requirements.

Of course, small corporations in particular often have informal "meetings" where these matters are decided. However, it is important to subsequently prepare meeting minutes or unanimous written consents (signed by all the directors in lieu of a meeting) that approve the actions.

If your corporation has not kept adequate records of shareholder and board meetings, these records with can and should be reconstructed with the aid of a legal professional.

You should obtain proper legal consultation if you think that your corporate records might not be getting the attention they should be.

Effective Meetings - Tips

The following are some tips to help you make your next meeting successful, effective and maybe even fun.

Before The Meeting

1. Define the purpose of the meeting.
2. Develop an agenda in cooperation with key participants. See a sample agenda.
3. Distribute the agenda and circulate background material, lengthy documents or articles prior to the meeting so members will be prepared and feel involved and up-to-date.
4. Choose an appropriate meeting time. Set a time limit and stick to it, if possible. Remember, members have other commitments. They will be more likely to attend meetings if you make them productive, predictable and as short as possible.
5. If possible, arrange the room so that members face each other, i.e., a circle or semi-circle. For large groups, try U-shaped rows.
6. Choose a location suitable to your group's size. Small rooms with too many people get stuffy and create tension. A larger room is more comfortable and encourages individual expression.
7. Use visual aids for interest (e.g., posters, diagrams, etc.). Post a large agenda up front to which members can refer.
8. Vary meeting places if possible to accommodate different members. Be sure everyone knows where and when the next meeting will be held.

During The Meeting

1. Greet members and make them feel welcome, even late members when appropriate.
2. If possible, serve light refreshments; they are good icebreakers and make your members feel special and comfortable.
3. Start on time. End on time.
4. Review the agenda and set priorities for the meeting.
5. Stick to the agenda.
6. Encourage group discussion to get all points of view and ideas. You will have better quality decisions as well as highly motivated members; they will feel that attending meetings is worth their while.
7. Encourage feedback. Ideas, activities and commitment to the organization improve when members see their impact on the decision making process.

8. Keep conversation focused on the topic. Feel free to ask for only constructive and non-repetitive comments. Tactfully end discussions when they are getting nowhere or becoming destructive or unproductive.
9. Keep minutes of the meeting for future reference in case a question or problem arises.
10. As a leader, be a role model by listening, showing interest, appreciation and confidence in members. Admit mistakes.
11. Summarize agreements reached and end the meeting on a unifying or positive note. For example, have members volunteer thoughts of things they feel have been good or successful or reiterate the organization's mission.
12. Set a date, time and place for the next meeting.

After The Meeting

1. Write up and distribute minutes within 3 or 4 days. Quick action reinforces importance of meeting and reduces errors of memory.
2. Discuss any problems during the meeting with other officers; come up with ways improvements can be made.
3. Follow-up on delegation decisions. See that all members understand and carry-out their responsibilities.
4. Give recognition and appreciation to excellent and timely progress.
5. Put unfinished business on the agenda for the next meeting.
6. Conduct a periodic evaluation of the meetings. Note any areas that can be analyzed and improved for more productive meetings. See a sample meeting evaluation.

And remember, effective meetings will keep them coming back!

Creating a Meeting Agenda

The meeting agenda is a roadmap for the meeting. It lets participants know where they're headed so they don't get off track. Most importantly, the meeting agenda gives a sense of purpose and direction to the meeting.

All agendas should list the following:

- Meeting start time
- Meeting end time
- Meeting location
- Topic headings
- Include some topic detail for each heading
- Indicate the time each topic is expected to last
- Indicate which meeting participants are expected to be the main topic participants

Sample Agenda

Internet Marketing Association Meeting Agenda		
Start at 10:00 a.m. in Board Room		
Item	Responsible	Time
Opening Remarks	President	5 min
VP Membership Report -intramural report -new member program intro	VPM	20 min
VP Financial Report -status of budget -housebill status	VPF	7 min
VP Rush Report -status of current efforts -status of next term plans	VPR	7 min
VP Internal	VPI	5 min
VP External	VPE	10 min
Guest Speaker	Community Relations	15 min
End at 11:10		
Let's keep on track!		

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Effective Meetings Workshop

Career for Student Development

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Diane M. Wiater, Ph.D



Key to Success

Your preparation, facilitation and follow-up are key to a successful meeting.



What we'll cover

Meetings

- Purpose
- Vision
- Planning the meeting
 - Planning
 - Preparing the Agenda
 - Preparation
- Facilitating the meeting
 - Guidelines
 - Your role
 - Committing to time frames
- Evaluate each meeting
- Recap
- Follow-up
 - Action items
 - Minutes



Meeting Purpose

Everyone should know why you are meeting.

- Informational
- Planning
- Decision making



Vision

Restate the vision/purpose every meeting.

- It keeps focus.
- It reminds everyone why they are doing what they are doing.
- It keeps the spark alive.



Planning for the Meeting

Success: Ask yourself and your people what do we need to make this meeting a success?



Planning

- Choose and book a conducive location.
- Follow up on action items from previous meeting(s).
- Collect needed materials/resources.
- Collect needed information.
- Create and check distribution lists so no one is left out.
- Invite all necessary people.
- Use checklists so as to cover all details.
- Prepare and distribute the agenda.



Preparing the Agenda

Always refer to your purpose and plan as you prepare an agenda.

Standardize your agenda with add-ons.

What needs to be on the agenda?

Who will handle what parts – do they know they are responsible?

Know how long you want to spend on each item – shadow agenda



Shadow Agenda

- Agenda copy used by facilitator.
- Includes time planned to spend on each item.
- Time information can be given to everyone.
 - May keep everyone on target.
 - May make people feel too controlled.



Preparation – Follow-up

Avoid surprises.

Part of your work is preparation.

- Discuss things in advance with individuals.
- Know who is going to present what – are they ready?
- Know who is where on an issue.
- Know your people.



Agenda

- Always use an agenda. It's your plan/expectation for the meeting
- Send out a tentative agenda a few days in advance and allow others to contribute to the agenda.
 - Final agenda should be sent out in time to allow everyone to properly prepare for the meeting.
 - Always use an agenda.



Facilitating the Meeting

- Know your role.
- Know your people.
- Follow your plan.
 - Establish guidelines.



Meeting Guidelines

- How will you handle decisions?
- How will you handle follow-up on action items?
- How will you handle getting input?
- How will you handle conflict?
- What are you expecting from everyone?
- Many of these items are settled early in the committee-forming process.



Facilitating - Your role

You set the tone for the meeting.

You are the facilitator/director of the meeting.

You need to know what you are trying to accomplish – as does everyone else.

It's up to you to be sure the meeting goes the way it needs to go.



Facilitating – Your role

Guide the discussion.

Prepare your questions in advance.

Be sure to get input from all parties.

Indirect

- Are there any other comments?

Direct

- Kalihl, did you wish to add something?



Facilitating - Your role

- Avoid time wasters and distracters.
 - Elect a time watcher.
 - Find fun, creative ways to point out and stop distracters.
- Be willing to “interrupt.”
 - Allow me to interrupt.
 - Let’s table that.
 - We’re going to cover that in a few minutes.
 - Can we talk about that outside of the meeting?
 - Allow me to pull us back on track.
 - Let’s cover this first.
 - Let’s complete this item.



Time Commitment

Stay committed to your time frame.

- If you have an hour scheduled, end at 59 minutes not 65 minutes.
- There is always more work to be done. Going over your scheduled time creates tension, resentment and conflict.
- Staying within your time commitments honors people.



Evaluate

Utilize a few minutes at the end of every meeting to evaluate the meeting, and your meetings will continually improve.



Action Items - Outcomes

- Toward the end of the meeting, recap the action items, outcomes and decisions.
- Each action item should list the individual responsible and the deadline for the action.



Follow-up

What next?

- Notes or minutes: your agenda becomes the outline for your minutes.
- Discussions with individuals as needed.
- Prep for next meeting.
- Keep the commitments.



Notes and Minutes

Notes or minutes should be kept on file and distributed for every meeting.

At a minimum they should:

- Provide information everyone needs.
- Note what was covered.
- Note any decisions made.
- List action items, deadlines and who is responsible.
- Note next meeting times.



Wrap -up

Your preparation, facilitation and follow-up are key to a successful meeting.



Resource

Scholtes, P. R.; The Team Handbook.
Joyner Associates, Inc. 1988