



TIPS FOR RUNNING EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

All productive meetings begin in the same way: planning. Lack of preparation is the main reason why meetings fail. When officers and members of an organization wait until an hour before a meeting to think about what they want to accomplish and how they will do so, the results are often disastrous. Instead, planning should take place well in advance of the meeting.

MEETING SPACE

Environment has a significant effect on behavior. Thinking and participating are easier when people are comfortable. Therefore, you should select and arrange your meeting space with care. Be sure that the room is the right size. A room that is too small can become stuffy and create tension. On the other hand, a room that is too large will feel empty. The room should have adequate ventilation and lighting and be free from extraneous noise.

Try to arrange the seating in a u-shape or hollow-square. This allows members to see one another and participate. If you can, provide table space so that members can write and take notes. If this is not possible, at least have a table for the leader and the secretary. You may also want to arrange to have a whiteboard and markers to make notes that the entire group can see.

AGENDA

The agenda is the "blueprint" for your meeting. It is a list of the various topics that your group will discuss during the meeting. If there are no topics to be discussed, there is no need for a meeting. An agenda ensures that your meeting has a purpose and that everyone knows what its specific objectives are. In preparing an agenda, solicit items from officers, members, and other relevant people. Collect documents and other papers that support each agenda item. Be sure you know the point of each agenda item (e.g., is it a decision item, sharing of information, topic for discussion, etc.).

When the agenda is completed, distribute it to your members several days in advance. Distribute supporting documents in advance or have them available for examination at the meeting. Before the meeting, be sure that people responsible for agenda items are ready to make their presentations.

RULES

Before you have your first meeting, there should be general agreement on how formal your meetings will be. This will depend upon such factors as the size of your group (larger groups often need more rules to function efficiently) and your purpose (a social group will probably want to be very informal). Some decisions to be made include:

- Who will lead the meeting and what powers will that person have?
- Will you keep a written record of your meeting (minutes) and, if so, who will be responsible for taking the minutes?
- Will you repeat information for members who arrive late? (It is usually unwise to do this.)
- Will people be asked to submit reports and proposals in writing?
- How will the group decide if a long discussion should be continued, postponed, or terminated?
- Will the group depend upon volunteers for most of its work or will someone have the authority to appoint people?
- What will the group do if the meeting runs beyond the stated time?

MEETING TIME

Choose a meeting time that is convenient for as many of your members as possible. Although you might want to allow some flexibility, it is usually best to have regular meetings at the same time and place. As well as designating a starting time, indicate an ending time for meetings. This allows your members to plan their personal schedules. Send out notices of the meeting well in advance. If you do not meet on a regular basis, it might be helpful to phone people the night before a meeting.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Because it may deal with a lot of details and mundane issues, a meeting can be tedious. Members become bored and "tune out." On the other hand, meetings can also deal with controversial issues that cause emotions to run high. Members might respond by either trying to avoid the conflict or becoming even more emotional in their discussion. In either case, it is easy to forget the basic principles that make a meeting productive. Some of these are listed below.

- Show common courtesy to each other. Interrupting someone, leaving the room frequently, and whispering while someone else is talking all show disrespect for guests and fellow members.
- Listen before speaking. Be sure you have heard and understand what others have said before making a response.
- Stay involved. Ask questions if you do not understand an item on the agenda. Issues are much less boring if you know what they are about.
- Take responsibility for what is happening. If you believe something is wrong with the meeting, discuss it with the group.