

# Making Meetings Work Better

MODULE FOUR CONCENTRATES on the methods and processes for making the time we spend together in meetings more productive. “Let’s have a meeting” has been the catchall response to any problem, dilemma, or decision that needs to be addressed, and often it is the best response. But meetings can work against groups if they are not well-planned, well-managed, or if their purposes are misunderstood. Module Four identifies the characteristics of good meetings and points out the pitfalls that often thwart positive outcomes.

## **CRITERIA FOR FAILED MEETINGS**

Meetings are most often hindered by two main factors: misunderstanding between the participants and the inability to make decisions about important matters. Both are understandable. People come to meetings with a general idea of the purpose but with a lifetime of different experiences, perceptions, and attitudes. It shouldn’t be surprising when there is a clash of opinion or a difference of ideas. It is perfectly natural and predictable. But we must also be aware that there are structures for meetings that can help groups get over the bumpy times so that the meetings don’t become gripe sessions for individuals, speeches from the loudest and most outspoken of the group, or worse still, a lot of talk and no action.

## **MISUNDERSTANDING IS A MAJOR PITFALL**

There are many things that cause misunderstanding in meetings, including different personal and cultural experiences, alternate views of the desired outcomes, and personal agendas. The first area of misunderstanding can usually be addressed by having time for individuals to get to know each other in a nonthreatening setting, having people express a personal passion or interest they have and why, and last, acknowledging that individuals see the world differently and that these differences are what adds to the richness of learning. Having different views of the meeting outcomes (or outcomes for the larger issues being discussed) requires a skilled meeting facilitator, a carefully crafted and adhered-to agenda, and clear communication about the meeting beforehand. All of this helps the flow of the meeting and the ultimate outcome.

In some ways, personal differences and different views are easier to remedy than the third component that leads to misunderstanding—personal agendas. When a person comes to a meeting with his or her own ax to grind or issue to put forth, it often derails the meeting

both for the issue at hand and for other issues to come because it so disrupts the process. Meeting participants who want to filibuster the meeting for their idea or cause have some very predictable behaviors. They generally are poor listeners, are repetitive, and use jargon. They make personal accusations and try to exercise power and domination. They always turn the attention to a problem they have. The meeting topic may be homelessness prevention but they want to talk about traffic and sprawl. They take issue with everything—always questioning the why and wherefore of the meeting and the direction it is taking. And finally, they want to take their toys and go home if the meeting doesn't go their way. Beware and be alert. The lessons learned in Module Four will help to divert and prevent this very destructive behavior and allow the meeting to go forward in a productive way.

### **LACK OF ACTION**

Another pitfall that derails meetings is the lack of action. Meetings have different purposes (i.e., informational, planning, and decision making), but all should have an action component, even if it is simply to decide and plan the next meeting. In community settings, the most frequent group tension is between the talkers and the doers, or the process people and the product people. With an agenda in hand that allows for discussion and then appropriate action, a meeting can stay on course. However, it is often hard to make a decision of any magnitude without much discussion and conversation. If a meeting is intended as a decision time, then there are things that groups can do to satisfy both the talkers and the doers and still get the job done. Settle and correct misperceptions and misunderstandings about the issue to be decided at the outset of the meeting and in communication beforehand. Don't come to a decision too quickly. Groups tend to make riskier decisions than individuals; therefore, it is important for the meeting to allow time for participants to think through the decision to be made and the possible consequences.

Explore and review alternatives against the main goal of the organization or group. Use effective decision-making techniques to reach consensus and determine the course of action.

Learning to make meetings work for you, not against you, is a tremendous organizational skill. Think of the time spent in a meeting as critical strategizing and communication time to address the issue and plan it accordingly.

## *Why Are We Meeting?*

Communicate the purpose of a meeting clearly. This will minimize frustrations and help accomplish objectives. Defining a realistic scope of work helps ensure that the group will make progress.

### **SOME MEETING PURPOSES INCLUDE:**

- Getting acquainted, introducing people to each other, and sharing information about each other's work.
- Learning the different perspectives people have on an issue.
- Generating ideas about how a problem could be solved.
- Developing specific plans to address an issue.
- Making decisions about specific work to undertake, money to allocate, etc.

# Meeting Evaluation Checklist

	YES	NO
1. The purpose of the meeting was made clear before everyone came together and again at the beginning of the actual meeting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Notice of the meeting had been provided well in advance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Participants were asked at some point for their input into the agenda.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. The agenda was distributed in advance or at the beginning of the meeting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. The time, date, and location of the meeting allowed for maximum stakeholder participation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Key stakeholders were present or represented at the meeting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Participants' circumstances were taken into account when selecting the meeting location.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. The meeting room was conducive to achieving the group's purpose. (Chairs, tables, lighting, sound, heating/cooling, space, etc., were adequate.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Ground rules were agreed upon and adhered to during the meeting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. The facilitator ensured a fair, democratic meeting process.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. The facilitator kept the meeting focused and moving forward.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Decisions and actions were recorded in writing and shared with the members either during or soon after the meeting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. The meeting started and ended on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

# Agendas for Meetings

Meeting agendas are not a luxury item. They are absolutely essential for keeping a group moving toward its goals. When group members are involved in creating the agenda, or at least when they have an opportunity to “sign off” on it, the agenda becomes an agreement between everyone about what they will accomplish together. When a group follows an agenda, everyone’s time is used more productively. Agendas also help reduce conflict because they clarify in written form the scope of work to be accomplished and the time period in which this effort will be made.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN CREATING AN AGENDA

### *Working together*

Consider having group members create the agenda collaboratively. They can do this prior to the meeting or at the end of one meeting in anticipation of the next. If this isn’t possible, facilitators may want to have the group review the agenda to ensure there have been no oversights or omissions before beginning the meeting.

### *Time*

- Find out from group members the best time to schedule a meeting. You want to ensure maximum attendance.
- Schedule adequate time for addressing each agenda item and avoid “packing” the agenda. “Haste makes waste” is an old saying that reminds us if we get in too much of a hurry, there’s a chance that our efforts will be wasted. It is frustrating for group members to be hurried through an agenda especially when issues require thoughtful consideration.
- Rely on ground rules to help manage presenters or discussions that exceed the time allotted.
- Above all, meetings should begin and end on time!

## *Agendas for Meetings (continued)*

### ***Logistics***

The location of a meeting can determine whether people participate. Try to hold meetings in “neutral” or nonthreatening places that are also accessible to everyone who should be attending. Does public transportation serve the location? Is there plenty of parking? Will some group members require childcare? Is the location safe and welcoming to the group?

Consider the room size and seating capacity, the number of rooms needed, seating arrangements, lighting, sound, and whether or not the room is accessible to participants who have physical disabilities. Attention to logistics communicates to participants that:

- The group hosting the meeting values their contribution.
- The work being done is important and worthy of attention.
- The group hosting the meeting is organized, competent, and respectful of people’s time and obligations.

### ***Advance notice***

Provide plenty of advance notice of the meeting. In some cases you might want also to issue a reminder phone call or e-mail message to group members.

## Sample Agendas

### SAMPLE AGENDA FOR A NEW GROUP

#### ***Community Leadership Partners Meeting***

Monday, April 12  
7:00-9:00 p.m.  
Community Center  
Room 101

- Welcome and introductions
- Clarify group's purpose, mission, or charge
- Participants/stakeholders briefly state their experience and the interests they represent
- Seek agreement on the next steps to be taken
- Ask for participants' comments on the effectiveness of the meeting
- Agree on time, date, and location for the next meeting
- Adjourn

### SAMPLE AGENDA FOR AN ESTABLISHED GROUP

#### ***Community Leadership Partners Meeting***

Monday, April 12  
7:00-9:00 p.m.  
Community Center  
Room 101

- Welcome and check-in
- State charge, mission, or purpose. Make arrangements to introduce new members to the mission in some detail outside the regular meeting time
- Assess progress of work already underway, review and adjust plans
- Consider new issues; use creative approaches to generate new options and possibilities for future consideration
- Evaluate meeting effectiveness and make decisions about needed changes in meeting process
- Summarize assignments; set next meeting time, date, and location
- Adjourn

# *Stakeholder Identification*

A stakeholder is anyone who has something to gain or lose from the work of a group. All stakeholders have knowledge to share when it comes to solving issues facing the community.

Gathering stakeholders around the table is a challenge facing all organizations. In communities of every size, too few people make too many decisions for the majority. The reality is that we can ill afford to exclude anyone's ideas from the community-change process. Space at the table must be enlarged and expanded to include the voices and perspectives of all stakeholders.

## **SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK**

- Who stands to gain or lose something as a result of our efforts?
- Have we made an effort to include representatives of all stakeholders in our meetings?
- Have we heard from everyone who has an interest in this issue?
- Is our group representative of our community?
- Are we communicating with stakeholders in ways that encourage their involvement in our efforts?



## *Ground Rules for Groups*

Whereas an agenda represents the agreement between group members about how they will spend their time together, ground rules are the agreement group members make about how they will relate to each other.

Ground rules provide an understanding that group members can rely on as they carry out their work together. There is no one process for generating ground rules. The facilitator can present a list of possible rules. Then members can use the Polling Method to prioritize the top five to ten rules they would like to adopt. Alternatively, an entire group can brainstorm possible ground rules and then discuss which they would like to adopt. Another strategy is for group members to work in pairs to generate a few essential ground rules. Pairs then present their ideas to the large group. Hopefully some of the same ground rules will appear on several lists, indicating those rules that are most important to all members of the group.

A final note about ground rules: Make sure they are adhered to or they are useless! All participants in the group—not just the facilitator—should take responsibility for conducting the meeting according to the ground rules.

### **SOME SAMPLE GROUND RULES**

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Share “air time.”
- One person at a time speaks. Don’t interrupt.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- If you are offended, say so.
- You can disagree, but don’t personalize it.
- Stick to the issue.
- No name-calling or stereotyping will be allowed.
- Everyone helps the facilitator keep the discussion moving and on track.

Adapted from Matt Leighninger, Catherine Flavin-MacDonald, and Reem Ghandour, *Building Strong Neighborhoods: A Study Circle Guide for Public Dialogue and Community Problem Solving* (Pomfret, CT: Topsfield Foundation, 1998).

## Write It Down!

When someone records the activity that occurs during a meeting, essentially he or she is creating the group's "memory." Usually groups use large sheets of chart paper and markers to record the group's work.

Facilitating and recording are two very different responsibilities. It's ideal to have a person designated as a recorder for meetings although not essential. Sometimes out of necessity, facilitators find themselves responsible for recording minutes of the meetings as well.

### **THE GROUP RECORD:**

- Helps a group focus on its task by providing a point of attention;
- Provides an instant record of what the group members decided and how they decided it;
- Keeps group members from feeling like they have to remember everything that has been said and done;
- "Remembers" people's ideas;
- Frees group members from taking notes;
- Assures participants that their ideas have been heard by the rest of the group because they see them recorded publicly;
- Enables group members to check that ideas are being recorded accurately;
- Discourages repetition of ideas;
- Holds ideas generated at one point in the agenda for later use;
- Encourages a sense of accomplishment because all the work can be seen at all times by everyone;
- Makes it easy to catch up latecomers or those who couldn't attend;
- Reduces accountability problems: Decisions made and those responsible for carrying them out are made public; and
- Is a low-cost strategy that any group can use to increase its effectiveness.

Source: Michael Doyle and David Straus, *How to Make Meetings Work* (New York, NY: Jove Books, Berkley Publishing Group, 1982), pp. 40-43.

# *Tips for Facilitators*

## **THE DOS**

- Discuss your neutral role with the group
- Set up ground rules
- Set up an agreed-upon decision-making process (majority vote, consensus, etc.)
- Be prepared for the meeting:
  - Know who is attending
  - Know interests of participants as well as issues
  - Know what is expected to be accomplished—goals and objectives
- Make sure all participants agree to goals, objectives, and agenda
- Be inclusive to ensure full participation
- Keep the process moving
- Keep the group focused on the goal, objectives, and the agenda
- Ask for clarification if necessary
- Restate interests, positions, and issues clearly and neutrally
  - Check with group to ensure accuracy
- State and write down any decisions made by the group

## **THE DON'TS**

- Do not show favoritism
- Do not criticize, debate, argue, or talk too much
- Do not push the process too quickly

### ***The difference between a facilitator and a mediator***

Both are neutral but the mediator has been asked by the parties to help solve conflict; the facilitator has been asked to help ensure that the process is fair and to record agreements.

### ***The difference between a chair as facilitator and a third-party facilitator***

The chair may step out of the role as facilitator and state something substantive. A chair may choose to rotate which group member may facilitate a meeting. A member who serves as facilitator may also choose to step out of the facilitation role and make a comment about substance. In no case should a third-party facilitator make substantive comments.

## *Balancing Process and Product Interests*

A healthy group strikes a balance between “process” and “product” interests. If there is too much emphasis on process, participants can grow frustrated that no progress is being made—that they are “meeting to meet,” that they are unnecessarily deferring decision making and action. If there is too much emphasis on product without attention to fostering healthy group interaction, conflict can tear the group apart before it can accomplish anything. Decisions can be made before the group has thoroughly investigated underlying causes of a problem or developed the most promising strategy to address it.

Both process and product approaches are crucial to accomplishing group work. Groups that recognize and balance this tension will ultimately make better decisions and build the relationships to implement them over the long term.

### **PROCESS PEOPLE: “WE TRY HARDER”**

Process people tend to concentrate on group interaction and dynamics. Process people are engaged in the way the group conducts its work and the interaction among participants.

#### ***Process people’s interest in group interaction can focus on the following:***

- Setting and maintaining group norms for discussion
- Ensuring that all team members participate in group discussions
- Ensuring fairness in decision making
- Making research available to increase information that the group needs to make decisions

### **PRODUCT PEOPLE: “JUST DO IT”**

Product people are attuned to accomplishing objectives. Product people are engaged in what the group does and when it does it.

#### ***Product people’s interest in completing group objectives can focus on the following:***

- Initiating a project or course of action
- Defining specific tasks, delegating work, and developing deadlines
- Proposing options to promote decision making
- Celebrating accomplishments

