

HOW TO ORGANISE A MEETING

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Why do we write guidelines on how to prepare and carry out meetings? Because we often hear: too many meetings! meetings are too long! and we hope that well-prepared and well-guided meetings can lead to satisfactory meetings (in which decisions are taken, good plans are made, sufficient information given), and at the same time reduce the length of a meeting, or unnecessary frequent meetings.

1. The special role of a chairperson, and a secretary

The role of a chairperson:

- timekeeping
- consensus on agenda, follow the agenda, if necessary adjust the agenda
- facilitate discussions
- repeat, confirm decisions and intended actions.



The role of the secretary:

- prepare agenda (concertation with chairperson, and with those who have to prepare presentations!)
- send the invitations (+ agenda)
- keep minutes (or make sure that a minute keeper is appointed).

Some tasks can be delegated: any other participant may be given the task to keep time (and warn the chairperson when time is not kept), and also it is not un-usual to give the task of minutes writing to another participant (taking minutes by turn, each meeting another writer), to split up the task of minute writing to several persons (per subject), or to give the task to an outsider (a secretary of the office).

Also the chairing of a meeting may be delegated to another person. One good reason to do so is when you as chairperson are personally involved in a certain subject, and you really want to participate actively in the debate. In that case you cannot stay 'above' the discussion, you risk to confuse your chairing position with your contribution in the debate, and even risk to be accused of abusing your position, forcing group decisions. So then (for certain subjects) it is better to (propose to) hand over to a more neutral person.

2. Preparation of a meeting

2.1 Objective(s) of a meeting

Meetings are just one of several tools of communication in an organisation, or between organisations. However, they seem to be the most important way of communicating, because in a meeting important decisions can be taken, or plans can be prepared, or ... and ... Yes! What is (or are) the objective(s) of this meeting? Do we meet for a strategic discussion, to discuss personnel issues, or to be informed about activities carried out, and the ones to come next (Planning & Reporting), or to discuss financial matters?

2.2 Invitations for a meeting

It naturally depends on the objective of a meeting, who we invite. But generally, to improve meetings, it may be interesting to consider this: invite a person from another (similar) organisation, who can give an input, on how they do things differently, or how they can help.

When preparing a letter to invite people for a meeting, make sure that they are at least informed about the objectives of the meeting, time, venue, and preferably even the agenda, and who else will participate. This allows the invitee to assess the importance of a meeting, to make a choice to attend or not, or partly. Also it allows the invitee to prepare for the meeting (e.g. discuss things with others, or collect relevant information).

2.3 The agenda

The agenda is the programme for a meeting. It indicates the more or less logical order of the subjects, usually according to the objective(s) of the meeting. It also indicates time: at least the beginning time and the end time. A professional agenda for a meeting looks more or less like this:

- 8.00 Opening
- 8.10 Adoption of the agenda
- 8.15 Adoption of the minutes of last meeting
- 8.20 Matters arising from the minutes
- 8.30 Agenda subject 1
- 9.00 Agenda subject 2, etc.
- 9.15 Other matters arising.
- 9.30 Summary of decisions and action plan.
- 9.45 Closing.

2.4 Preparation of presentations

The chairperson or secretary should make sure that those who are to present something are well prepared! For example, when financial matters are to be reported in the meeting, the calculations have to be presented well, for example in a table that allows to compare expenditures per activity, or per period. If such preparations are not done beforehand, unnecessary confusion and waste of time is the result.

Also the minutes of the previous meetings(s) should be prepared: if they are not available, unnecessary repetition will be the result.

2.5 Preparation of the venue

Communication in meetings is essential. This communication is not only between chairperson and participants, but also between participants. Besides, the communication is not only verbal, but also non-verbal! Therefore it is very important to create an environment that allows for a maximum of communication.

Choose a venue that allows for:

- good hearing (no noise from outside) and still with good ventilation
- visual presentations (with a blackboard, or a wall upon which one can pin a big sheet of paper, or with an overhead projector)
- **arranging tables and chairs in a (semi-)circle** so that everybody can see each other!!! For this it may be necessary for a secretary to arrive earlier, to be able to shift furniture, clean, etc.

3. How to chair a meeting

Some tips for a chairperson:

1. Opening: recall the objectives of the meeting, appoint a secretary (for minutes writing), if necessary introduction of (some) participants. As part of the the opening some warming-up activities may be done, for example: sing a song, each participant saying his/her name and adding a lie or copying your favourite animal, etc. etc.
2. Adoption of the agenda: ask for comments, suggestions, before adoption.
3. Adoption of the minutes of last meeting: ask for corrections. There you can choose to (have somebody) read the minutes read aloud, or only to read the decisions made, and the action plan.
4. Matters arising from the minutes: some matters in the action plan may not appear on the agenda, and still require exchange of information; if necessary re-adjust the agenda.
5. Agenda subjects: some matters are just for presentation, for information, but some matters require a discussion. The chairperson should facilitate discussions, making sure that:
 - people are well prepared (informed) before the discussion takes place; if necessary some time may be reserved during the meeting for participants to read (e.g. discussion papers).
 - repetition is avoided: summarise discussions, cut short those that repeat.
 - a friendly atmosphere is maintained; this means that personal attacks should not be rewarded (a chairperson can indicate that certain personally confronting remarks are not to the point), and sometimes a joke can also help.
 - everybody gets a fair opportunity to contribute to discussions: pay special attention to those who usually say little (women?, poor?), or those who sit far away or in a difficult corner: ask them a question, ask for their opinion.
 - those who try to dominate with their views are not allowed to talk too much.
 - discussions stay on track: avoid a change of the subject during a discussion!
 - if decisions have to be taken and discussions seem inconclusive: try to reach a consensus, or decide yourself based on (what you perceive as) the dominating or opinion (or the opinion that is acceptable to most people) or organise a voting.
 - confirm decisions or intended actions, and make sure that for each action there is a responsible.

6. Other matters arising: any subject not already discussed; if time is short, you can choose to postpone some matters to a next meeting.
7. Summary of the major decisions taken, and actions planned: a good secretary must have a list of decisions and actions.
8. Closing: the chairperson may invite another participants to give some closing remarks. Also it is useful to evaluate the time keeping, and: don't forget to decide on when & where to meet again!

Tip for the secretary: discuss after the meeting on how and when to finalise the minutes.

4. How to write minutes

When writing the title of the minutes, just think of those who are to read the minutes (mostly only those from your organisation). Minutes are just a very practical way to improve communication; do not add unnecessary formal things in the heading, that nobody really wants to read. In most cases a short title is simply enough.

After the title, start writing the date, and the names of participants that are present, and those who are invited but absent. Indicate who is the chairperson and who the secretary.

Now the minutes can follow the structure of the agenda that was adopted and followed during the meeting (see chapter 3). It may be useful to conclude the minutes with a separate list of decisions and actions.

Clearly not all that is said by each and every person can be written down. To make sure to have most important information, pay special attention to: summaries of discussions (made by the chairperson or anybody else), decisions that are made (repeated by the chairperson), and actions intended (and who is responsible). If you do want to write down details of a discussion, do not forget to note the name of a person, before noting the opinion given in that discussion. For example:

Mr. Phai: if there is training on use of computers, we also need certificates.



When things go too fast, or are not clear, a minute write should claim special attention from the chairperson, to clarify conclusions. Therefore it is practical to sit next to the chairperson.

For more formal minutes (for example in which decisions are taken on rules and regulations of a group) it may be practical to have the final version of the minutes signed by the chairperson and the secretary.