HOW TO Run Good Meetings

RUNNING MEETINGS

If you are active in a grassroots group, you spend a lot of time in meetings. You need to have meetings to conduct the business of your group, to build your group, and to win on issues you care about.

Good meetings generate strategies that can make the difference between winning and losing. Good meetings build group spirit, and make people feel important People can have fun in a good meeting.

We've all been to meetings that were boxing, frustrating, or felt like a complete waste of time. Bad meetings weaken your group, lower morale, and drive members away. The best way to hold a bad meeting is to leave everything to chance.

With planning and practice. your group can have good meetings. Because meetings are so important, successful grassroots groups take the time and effort to run them well.

WHY HOLD A MEETING

You can't have a good meeting without clear reasons for meeting in the first place. Know why you're holding the meeting. What's your purpose? What do you want to accomplish? If you think clearly about your purpose, you may find you don't need a meeting at all, and you'll plan better meetings when you do need them.

The purpose of community organizations is to take actions, not to hold meetings. It's easy to slip into a pattern of meetings, with no action. If your meetings are strictly educational and social, you will drive away members who want to act.

Community organizations hold meetings to make decisions and to move actions. Meetings can also be used to share information—but before you hold a meeting for that, consider other ways to get information out: in your newsletter, by phone, or in special mailings.

Meetings are good places to develop new ideas and approaches, to brainstorm and develop strategies. Groups also hold meetings to identify volunteers and divide up their workload. Your meetings can build morale by showing the group's support for its members.

PLANNING A MEETING

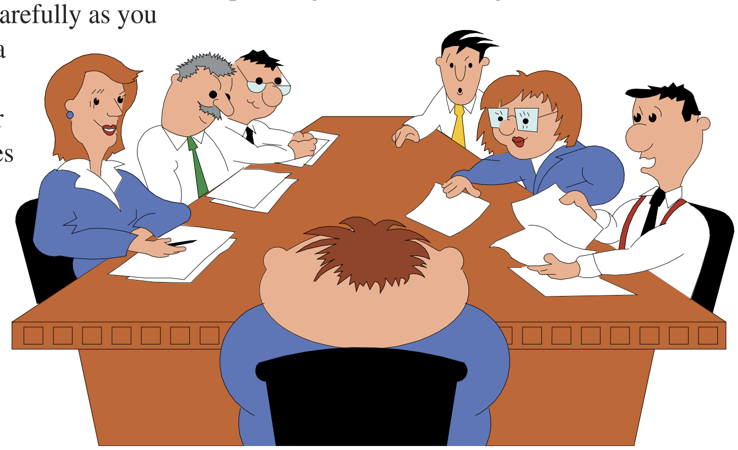
Pre-plan your meeting as carefully as you would if you were putting on a play. You need a script (your agenda). You need a cast (your members) who know their lines (the purpose of the meeting). You need a set and props (a room with the materials you need). You need a director (the Chair) who knows what is going to happen and how to make it happen.

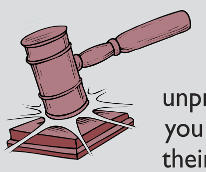
Some people are resistant to this kind of careful planning. They may say it will keep the group from being "spontaneous" or complain that decisions will be "wired in" ahead of time. But thorough planning doesn't predetermine what decision the group will make. It means you know ahead of time how the group will make the decision, using a fair process. A meeting can be "spontaneous" and still lead to unfair, undemocratic decisions or decisions at all. And a well-planned meeting can still be fun and surprising.

PLANNING TIPS

PLAN THE MEETING ON THE AGENDA

The chair should consult with as many people as possible in preparing the agenda and planning how the meeting will run.





Time is everyone's most valuable commodity. If your meetings are long, dull, or unproductive, people will resent you twice-over: first for wasting their time at the meeting, and second for taking them away from whatever they would have been doing if they hadn't come. Ask yourself: Should we hold this meeting? Is it necessary?

What are the main purposes of the meeting? Who needs to be there? How long will it take you to accomplish your purpose? What could go wrong? What can you do ahead of time to avoid problems?

CHOOSE A LOCATION

Line up a place to hold the meeting well in advance. It should be big enough for your group, but remember: empty chairs and empty space are demoralizing. Make sure the room is comfortable and well-lit, free of outside noise, and protected from intruders and disruptions. If you need to meet in small groups, can you? Is there a place to hang paper to record ideas and decisions?

Notify members and others who should attend of the time, place, and purpose of the meeting a week or more in advance—through the mail, over the phone, or going door-to-door. Then, if you really want them there, remind them again the day before or the morning of the meeting.

(Think about it: It's pretty hard to skip a meeting if someone calls you four hours before a meeting and you promise to be there. It's pretty easy to skip out if someone asks you two weeks before a meeting and you say, "I'll try to make it." Then you don't hear from anyone about the meeting after that.)

REMOVE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Tou may need to remove barriers to participation, such as arranging for transportation and child care.

CONSULT WITH LEADERS AND MEMBERS

Consult with key leaders and members who are coming and help them prepare, especially for items likely to be controversial. *What are their concerns? What issues do they want to discuss?*

THE AGENDA

- ❑ Have a written agenda. Send it out before the meeting.
- ❑ Put time limits on each item.
- ❑ The order of business depends on the purpose of the meeting. You want to cover the most important business first, before people get tired and have to leave. You can preview the agenda, asking for additions or other changes, at the beginning of the meeting.
- ❑ Put quick reports and updates early in the agenda, to get them out of the way. Mail out written reports and have short oral summaries at the meeting to save time.
- ❑ Explain each decision needed in a short sentence or two on the agenda so that people will be prepared to discuss them.
- ❑ Give several people responsibility for parts of the agenda, and prepare them ahead of time to be clear on what they need to do-present information, start a discussion, make a motion, or make sure a certain point gets made. It's a good idea to have back-up people prepared, too.
- ❑ Keep the agenda short—no more than two hours. A good meeting is measured by how much you get done, not by how long everyone is willing to sit there to do it.
- ❑ Provide for "open discussion" or "new business" towards the end of the meeting for things people just have to talk about, or that come up after you create the agenda. This item, especially, needs a time limit.

THE "MICRO-AGENDA"

One technique for improving your meetings is to think through and write down these four things about each item on the agenda:

Purpose: Why is this on the agenda? Why do we need to talk about it?

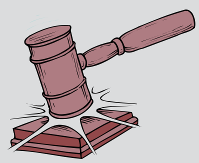
Objective: What precisely do we need to accomplish on this item?

Method: What's the best way to accomplish it? Who will take the lead for this item? Will we brainstorm a list, vote on a motion, watch a videotape, break into small groups? How long will it take? What materials do we need?

Results: What product will we have when we're done? A list of ideas, a decision in the form of a motion, a stack of letters to the Mayor?

- ❑ Plan an opening and closing that reinforce the main purpose of the meeting and emphasize a sense of the group. Depending on your group, local community and culture, you might use a short "icebreaker," a song or a prayer. Ending with a short evaluation provides accountability, unity, closure and helps the group identify ways to make the next meeting better.

Few things at a meeting are as frustrating as muddy decisions. When the last thing said on a subject is something like "OK, I guess we all agree we should follow up on Paul's idea," one or more of the following is likely to be true:



- ❑ We don't all agree on Paul's idea.
- ❑ We each have a different understanding of Paul's idea, or how to follow-up on it.
- ❑ We will forget what Paul's idea was by the end of the week (maybe by the end of the meeting).
- ❑ We will debate the subject all over again at the next meeting.

AT THE MEETING

- ❑ Arrive early. Get materials in place and the room ready. Set up slightly fewer chairs than you think you'll need.
- ❑ Start the meeting on time. Pass around a sign-in sheet. Recognize and welcome new people. Stick to the agenda, but make sure to allow for questions and participation by people in the group.
- ❑ Know what you want from each agenda item (a plan for future action, a specific decision, the names of those responsible for following up or who will serve on a committee, a list of questions or ideas). Always keep this purpose in mind.
- ❑ Delegate tasks identified during the meeting. Don't just say "we" will do it or schedule another meeting to decide who will do what. You want everyone to have something to do before the next meeting--even if it's only a leaflet to give someone, a phone call to make, or a sign to put up in a store window.

It's important to get participation from everyone, or from as many people as possible. Some people are naturally shy, and others may be too new to the group to jump in. You need a special plan to maximize participation.

Some techniques to use:

- ❑ Set "equal time" discussions (divide the allotted time between those on each side of a question).
- ❑ Brainstorm ideas from the group, recording them on flip charts. You can go around the room asking each person for one idea ("nominal group process").
- ❑ Break the group down into pairs or small groups (of four to six people) to discuss a specific question and then report back to the full group.

THE CHAIR

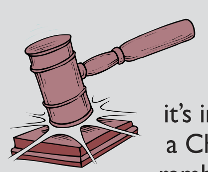
The Chair (or President) is the "director" of the meeting. The Chair moves the meeting along, ensures that the group sticks to its purposes, and keeps the meeting orderly and fair. The Chair encourages participation from everyone but knows how to cut off chatter.

Chairing a meeting well is hard work. The Chair may want to ask one or two members to be "helpers," who can:

- ❑ Keep track of the time, and advise the chair when time is running out on an item on the agenda;
- ❑ Alert the Chair when discussion is off the subject;
- ❑ Make sure that the group clarifies decisions it makes;
- ❑ Alert the Chair if someone hasn't been recognized or had a chance to contribute.

Practice different techniques for keeping control. Say, "Thank-you, Martha, that's very helpful, now I'd really like to hear from someone who hasn't had a chance to speak." "Excuse me, Fred, but we need to stick to this agenda, we can come back to your point about the weather under new business." If there are noisy side conversations, use a gavel; if things really get noisy, stand up. (It's amazing how quickly this simple technique brings order to an unruly meeting.) Use Robert's Rules of Order or some other set of procedures for making decisions that your group agrees on.

A good Chair keeps the meeting orderly and fair without dominating discussion or intimidating participants. Use humor and compliments, and keep a close eye on the clock and a firm hand on the gavel.



Perhaps the toughest job for a Chair is cutting off the meeting or taking it off track. We've all been taught it's impolite to interrupt someone. But a Chair who is too polite to cut off a rambling or dominating person is impolite to everyone else in the room.

AFTER THE MEETING

FOLLOW-UP

At the end of the meeting, review the decisions you've made. This gives you a chance to clarify any confusion about what was decided. Make sure someone has responsibility, and a deadline, for each follow-up task coming out of the meeting.

Evaluation at the end of a meeting helps the Chair learn to run better meetings and helps close a meeting with a feeling of unity. Ask each person to name one thing they liked and one thing to change at future meetings. (It's OK for any participant to "pass.") Don't argue with anyone about whether their praise or criticism is right or wrong. Everyone is entitled to their viewpoint. You aren't making decisions or judgements during an evaluation.

The Chair and a few key leaders (especially helpers) should do a longer evaluation afterwards, analyzing what worked, what didn't, and listing as many follow-up steps as they can think of. They should ask themselves: Did we do what we wanted to do? Did the meeting build the organization? Do the leaders, members, and staff all feel more ownership in the organization after this meeting? What did we learn?

Follow-up with the people who didn't show up. Tell them they were missed; give them a chance to explain their absence. Tell them what happened and ask them to come to the next action, event or meeting.

Talk to the new people who came. Did they like it? Remind them about the next action and invite them to come. Remind them of any tasks they said they would do and offer any help they might need.

MOTION—SECOND—DISCUSSION—VOTE

How do you make decisions in your group? Every group needs to agree on the procedure it will follow. Using a clear set of rules, such as *Roberts Rules of Order*, ensures that everyone has a fair chance to be heard and an equal say in the decisions you make.

The basic elements of *Roberts Rules of Order* are simple. First, someone must make a motion. After someone else seconds the motion, it is open for discussion. After everyone who wants has their say on the motion, the group votes. You can use more of Robert's Rules if you like (for amending motions, tabling ideas you're not ready to handle, and so on), but for most community group meetings, all you need is "*Motion—Second—Discussion—Vote.*"

Some people are intimidated or offended by the use of *Roberts Rules of Order* in a meeting of a community group. Some have had bad experiences with slick parliamentarians who misuse parliamentary procedure to prevent fair discussion or dissent. Others think the uses of these kinds of rules is confusing, stifles creativity, or takes up time with arcane or unnecessary legal mumbo-jumbo. In fact, clear rules, applied well, maximize fairness and minimize confusion:

- ❑ The Chair and other participants can tell when the discussion is off-track and bring it back.
- ❑ The Chair can cut off chatter-boxes and complainers politely.
- ❑ The Chair has a polite way to move things along when no one speaks up.

  The Chair has a way to decide when the group is ready to make a decision.
- ❑ The group can make clearer decisions.

WORC is a network of grassroots organizations from seven states that include 9,700 members and 44 local community groups. WORC helps its members succeed by providing training and by coordinating regional issue campaigns.

WORC Member Groups:
Dakota Resource Council
Dakota Rural Action
Idaho Rural Council
Northern Plains Resource Council
Oregon Rural Action
Powder River Basin Resource Council
Western Colorado Congress

WORC Billings Office
220 South 27th Street, Suite B
Billings, MT 59101
(406)252-9672
billings@worc.org
www.worc.org

WORC Washington, D.C. Office
110 Maryland Ave., NE, #307
Washington, DC 20002
(202)547-7040
dc@worc.org

WORC Montrose, CO Office
60584 Horizon Drive
Montrose, CO 81401
(970)323-6849
montrose@worc.org

WORC Lemmon, SD Office
2307 5th Avenue, NE
Lemmon, SD 57638
(701)376-7077
jerilynn@worc.org

FOR MORE ON RUNNING MEETINGS:

Principles of Community Organizing training sessions are held twice a year by WORC.

How to Hold a House Meeting and **How to Speak in Public** are other topics available in this series of guides to community organizing.

MORE HOW TO GUIDES:

WORC has produced a series of How To's, practical guides to assist members, staff, leaders and citizens to build strong organizations and effective issue campaigns.

Topics are listed on our website – **www.worc.org**. These publications can be downloaded from the website as PDFs or ordered for $2 each. Contact WORC regarding bulk orders or about training sessions on topics in this series.