# HOW TO Hold an Accountability Session

### ACCOUNTABILITY SESSION

An accountability session is a meeting between citizens and public officials. The purpose of an accountability session is to hold a decision maker – someone with the power and authority to give you something you want – accountable for the decisions he or she makes.

An accountability session is a chance to ask questions, raise issues people care about and exchange ideas. Most of all, it's a way to make public servants responsible to their constituents.

Accountability sessions don't have to be hostile shouting matches. To hold someone accountable is to get clear answers about what that person will do or has already done, and to tell that person clearly what you want. Accountability sessions are designed to get decision makers to take positions and make commitments.

The best way for most organizations to raise issues and hold officials accountable is to meet at a time and place chosen by the group, because more people will come and participate. Decision makers – the public officials whom you want to hold accountable – know this, too, so negotiations over the place and time of accountability sessions can be intense.

In any accountability session, community organizations want to maximize the control their members have over the event. That takes planning – lots of planning.

## PLANNING FOR AN ACCOUNTABILITY SESSION

### WHAT DO YOU WANT OUT OF THE MEETING?

Make lists of two kinds of objectives:

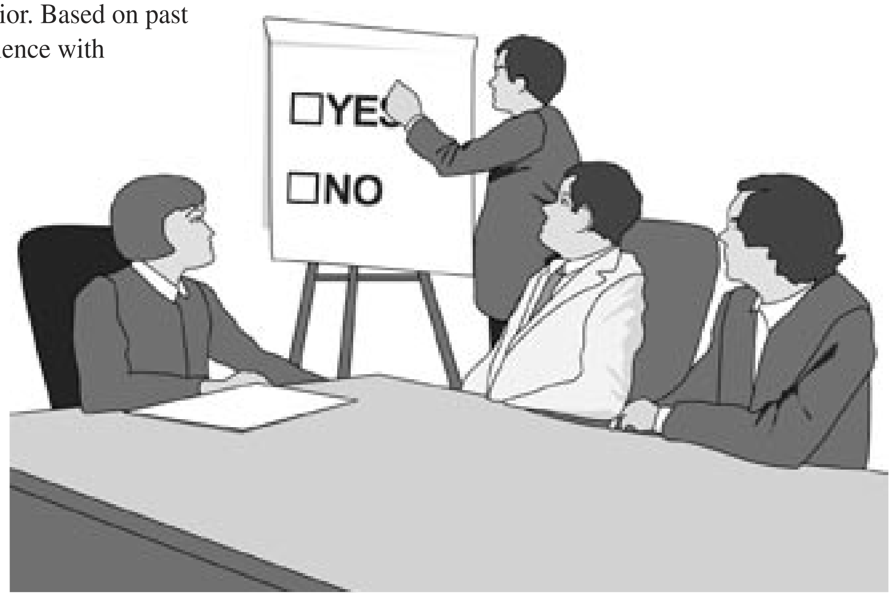
- Specific issues and concerns you will raise with the decision maker, and things you want (often called demands).
- Your group-building objectives, such as the number of members you want to participate, getting the right kind of media coverage, and showing the decision maker that he or she must deal with you, because your organization is powerful.

### HOW WILL YOU GET WHAT YOU WANT?

An accountability session in your community is a showcase for your group. There's a lot to gain – and a lot to lose.

Anticipate the decision maker's behavior. Based on past experience with this public official, will she or he play it hard or soft? Straightforward, or evasive? Will the decision maker bring along someone to help – to play flak-catcher? Are you clear about how much power the decision maker really has to address your demands? Make a list of all the ways the decision maker may try to avoid giving you what you want (Ask yourself: What would I do if I was the decision maker?)

Think about the members of your group. Are they angry? Passive? Is that good or bad? If they're angry, do you want to channel that anger to impress the decision maker with the seriousness of your group and your issues? Or do you want to suppress the anger to facilitate negotiations? If they're passive, will you pump them up? **Think it through.**



### THE CHECKLIST

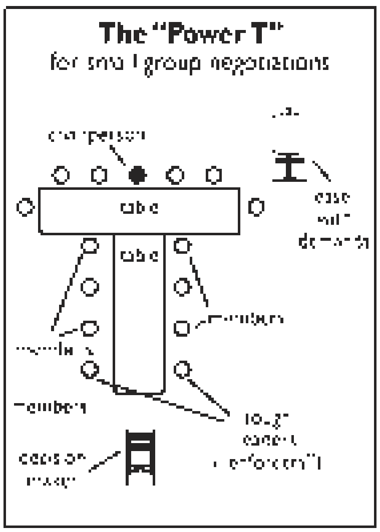
You should develop your own checklist of everything you need to do or get before the meeting. Check and double-check your planning.

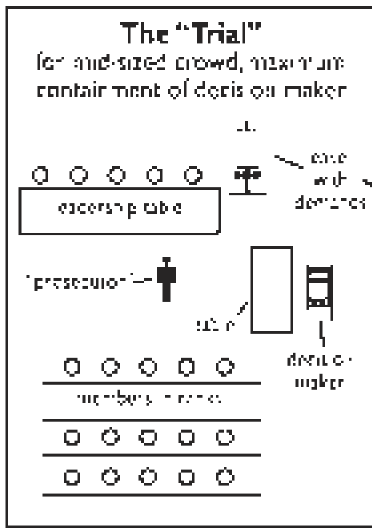
Here are some ideas to get you started. **Do you have:**

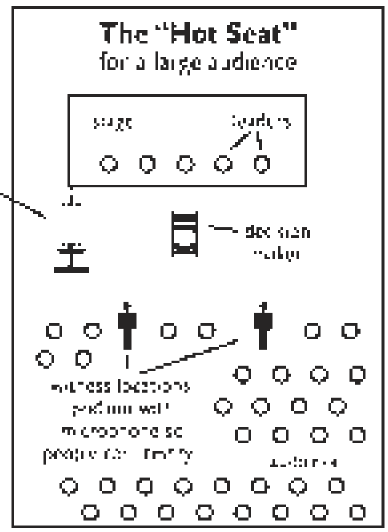
- ❑ a clear agenda for the meeting?
- ❑ a plan to turn out people for the meeting?
- ❑ a list of your demands prepared so **everyone** (all your members **and** the decision maker) will know what they are?
- ❑ well-briefed leaders?
- ❑ well-prepared members?
- ❑ a good meeting room setup? (See *"The Room"* below.)
- ❑ a clear batting order of who will present each demand, and when?
- ❑ an effective way to record the decision maker's response to your questions and demands?
- ❑ a plan to ensure you don't lose control of the meeting?
- ❑ props and other devices to get your points across?

### ARRANGE THE ROOM TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

Pay attention to room "geography." Different arrangements change the power dynamics. Anticipate how the decision make will behave. Does he or she have a forceful presence which you might want to contain, by placing him or her behind a table or hemmed in by leaders? Does the decision maker rattle easily? If so, it may make sense to sit him or her in a chair with no table to hide behind.




## TIPS TO ENSURE A GOOD SESSION

### LIST YOUR DEMANDS

Have a printed list of the things you want–your demands–to hand out to the members. In addition, consider having some sort of large, visual display of the demands, such as a scoreboard. This way, everyone can follow along as the leaders put the demands to the decision maker and push for **yes** or **no** answers.

### FIND A GOOD BALANCE

Accountability sessions are important opportunities to broaden the involvement of your members. Try to balance the need for a tight, disciplined session (which argues for limiting participation to experienced, core leadership) with maximizing participation and empowerment (which argues for getting everyone there). It's harder for you – and the decision maker – to negotiate in a crowded room. On the other hand, a room jammed with people is the best way to show your organization's strength.

### WORK AS A TEAM TO GET GOOD RESPONSES

In addition to a clear batting order, you need to plan to work together as a team. Everyone must **back up each other**. You want to avoid allowing the decision maker to gloss over an answer to a member's question or demand by moving on to the next demand or question. There should be a clear rule that you will not move on to another question or demand until the decision maker has given a specific, clear response to the last question.

# WHAT IF'S

Try to anticipate everything that might happen at an accountability session—especially everything the decision maker might do—and have a plan for dealing with each possibility. You need to make your own list—every meeting is different —but here are some examples:

## WHAT IF THE DECISION MAKER SHOWS UP EARLY?

Many groups have official "reception committees" which escort early-arriving decision makers to a waiting room and hold them there until the appointed time to begin the meeting.

## WHAT IF THE DECISION MAKER WANTS TO LEAVE BEFORE YOU'RE THROUGH?

Officials on the hot seat always seem to have a flight to catch or another pressing engagement just at the point where you start to make them sweat. Make sure your invitation and the decision maker's response clearly set out how long they are expected to stay. Then begin the meeting by reconfirming their consent to stay as agreed ("for 90 minutes," or "until 3 p.m.," or "as long as it takes to discuss these issues.") If the decision maker tries to leave early despite these agreements, your leader should say that this is extremely rude, and that you expect the decision maker to stay. Very few people will ignore clearly agreed to terms, or leave if called on it firmly but politely.

## WHAT IF THE DECISION MAKER WON'T RESPECT YOUR AGENDA OR YOUR LEADERS?

Who's meeting is it? If it's your meeting, you lose the advantage (and you may lose the issue) unless your leaders are prepared to insist that the decision maker follow your agenda. Prepare the person who will chair the meeting to insist that the agenda is followed.

## WHAT IF THE DECISION MAKER DOESN'T SHOW UP AT ALL?

A no-show insults the group. If you want to turn that insult into power, create a visual display so that everyone in the group knows that they've been insulted, and by whom. The most common method is an empty chair labeled with the decision maker's name. One group hung day-glo cards with the decision makers' names over the empty chairs. Another strung helium balloons marked with decision makers' names and caricatures of their faces. Put dummies or dolls in the chairs, or stick photos of the decision makers in their places.

If a decision maker doesn't show up, by all means use the insult to stir people up. But then you *must* offer the audience an alternative action they can take, or lead the group through a planning exercise for an action to hold the no-show decision maker accountable.

Some organizations load members into buses and cars and go to the home of a decision maker who fails to show up for an accountability session. If you do this, make sure it is well-planned, including precise directions to the person's home so you don't hit the wrong house by mistake. Your group may not feel comfortable with an action like this one, but there **must** be some follow-up step to deal with a no-show decision maker.

## WHAT IF THE DECISION MAKER GIVES YOU EVERYTHING YOU WANT?

Yes, this can happen. If what you *ask* for is all you really *want*, it's great. But keep in mind that it will be the end of that issue campaign – so celebrate, and make plans to move on to another issue. More often, there are other things you want, but you didn't plan to raise everything in one meeting. Have these other things in your hip pocket to present if the decision maker concedes on your primary demands right away.

## WHAT IF THE DECISION MAKER WON'T GIVE YOU A STRAIGHT ANSWER?

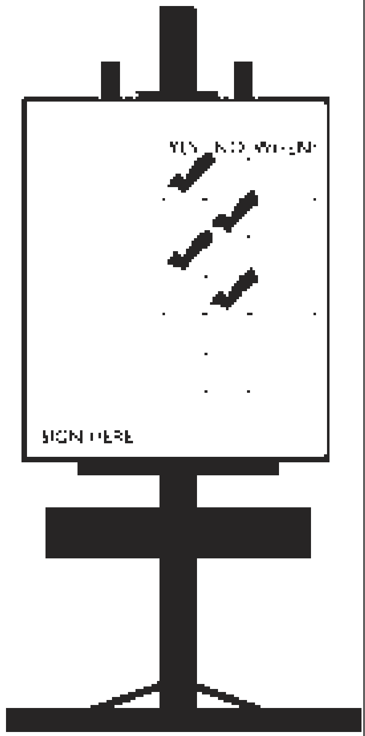
If the decision maker persists with an evasive answer, a non-answer, a half-answer or double-talk, score it as a no.

## WHAT IF THE DECISION MAKER GIVES YOU ABSOLUTELY NOTHING?

Now you have begun a real issue campaign! This is where most groups usually start – they ask a decision maker for what they want, they get nothing, they get angry, and they get moving on a campaign. You want to have a plan for this possibility that highlights how far apart you and the decision maker are, but keeps your group from being too demoralized. For example, if the decision maker says **"no, no, no"** right down the list, your chairperson could entertain a motion from the floor to excuse him or her so that you can proceed to group planning for the next actions in the campaign.

## THE SCOREBOARD

The scoreboard for the decision maker's responses to questions and demands should be clear for all to see. Questions and demands should be phrased in a way that calls for a yes or no answer. Any other phrasing allows the decision maker to wiggle around a direct answer. You can include a "When?" column on the score sheet to indicate deadlines for action whenever a demand calls for it. Your score-keeper should be tough and well-rehearsed to press for clear answers, using such clarifying questions as "Excuse me, but was that a 'yes' or a 'no'?"

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When you've run through the list of demands and have scored the yes's and no's, you can ask the decision maker to sign the demand sheet, attesting that these are indeed true answers. Many decision makers will balk; a few will scream bloody murder. But your insistence that they sign the answers in front of witnesses is an indication that you are very serious. If the decision maker refuses to sign, ask which no's should be yes's or which yes's, no's.

### CREDIT

Special thanks to Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, whose training materials cover many of the ideas discussed here.

## EVALUATING AN ACCOUNTABILITY SESSION

Always – *always* – evaluate an accountability session, right away. It's important to learn from what happened while everyone's memory is still fresh, and to come to a common understanding of what happened at the meeting and what the next steps are. It's astonishing how often ten people will come out of a meeting with ten different ideas about what went on inside. Here are some questions you can ask yourselves after you've met with a decision maker:

- ❑ Did we accomplish our objectives?
- ❑ What did we win?
- ❑ Did we clearly present our demands?
- ❑ Did we get clear and specific answers?
- ❑ Did we succeed at stopping the decision maker from dodging our demands and questions? [How?]
- ❑ Did we maintain control of the meeting? [How?]
- ❑ At what point in the meeting were we most effective? [Why? Which presentations, points, documentation, visuals, etc. worked best?]
- ❑ Was the agenda followed?
- ❑ Did we follow our game plan?
- ❑ Were we united?
- ❑ Did our members feel powerful?
- ❑ Do they feel good about the session?
- ❑ Did the decision maker feel our power?
- ❑ Are all of our members clear about the outcome of the session, what we won and didn't win?
- ❑ Do we have a clear next step?

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