

Structuring Effective Meetings

Conducting effective meetings plays a key role in developing and sustaining a productive partnership. Meetings provide opportunities to share information, develop relationships among partners, plan future actions, and get work done. Although meetings may provide the key to a partnership's success, if meetings are poorly planned or ineffectively conducted, they can be unproductive, stressful, or boring. While many of the tips below represent common sense, the number of meeting horror stories floating around most organizations suggests that they are often not followed. Although basic, these tips are worth careful consideration by anyone planning to hold a meeting.

Preparation

A little preparation and forethought goes a long way in making a meeting run smoothly. The following are some suggestions for meeting preparations that can help foster a successful meeting.

Choosing the right time. Care should be taken to schedule meetings at a time when all partners can attend. For partnerships that involve local citizens, this often necessitates scheduling meetings for evenings, lunch hours or weekends.

Choosing the right location. Many partnerships try to hold their meetings at a neutral site rather than at the offices of a partner or sponsoring government organization. It is especially important to meet on neutral ground if two or more of the partners have historically been adversaries. Many civic groups, restaurants, schools, and churches provide meeting rooms that can serve as neutral ground. Small meetings can be held in coffee shops or restaurants. The Quincy Library Group, a well-known multi-stakeholder group addressing environmental issues in Oregon began meeting in the public reading room of the local library, partly to ensure that a quiet, civil tone be kept in the dialogue.

Developing and circulating an agenda. Developing an agenda will help partners stay on-track during the meeting. Partners should be encouraged to suggest agenda items before the meeting. This provides people the opportunity to provide input and builds a sense of ownership among partners. When possible, the agenda should be circulated to people before the meeting. This will help people prepare for the meeting and let them know what to expect.

Arranging the meeting room. The people sponsoring the meeting should arrive a few minutes early to ensure that the room is set up properly for the meeting. Chairs and tables should be arranged in a way that encourages everyone to participate. Circular tables or large rectangular tables work well for encouraging discussion. Before the meeting, make sure that any equipment you plan to use, such as an overhead or slide projector is working properly, and have a contingency plan for the equipment not working. Finally, it is often helpful to have something to write on that the whole group can see. A large pad mounted on an easel is fairly easy to carry to meetings in restaurants or rooms that do not have blackboards or dry erase boards.

Important Components of the Meeting

Build in time for information sharing. Include an agenda item that lets each member bring other members up to date on what they have been doing, or on important developments that others should know. However, set a time limit per person, to keep overly talkative people from hijacking the meeting during this time.

Build in time at the end to summarize and discuss next steps. It is very important to remind people what decisions were made and what actions were assigned. It is also important to identify unfinished business and to discuss the topic and schedule for the next meeting.

Build in social time. It is important to build in some social time to build relationships among partners. One facilitator worked with two partnerships, one that included a joint lunch break in its meetings, and another that met at night and did not include any social time. She found that much higher levels of trust and rapport developed among members of the partnership that included the joint lunch breaks. A Harvard Business School professor who specializes in private sector partnerships notes, “the time spent chatting over coffee and donuts...before a meeting is not just ‘filler’ until the meeting begins, but a helpful adjunct to the process, a signal that people are willing to make gestures towards one another as people.”

Conducting the Meeting

Respect people’s time. Start and end meetings on time. Only schedule meetings as often as the group needs to make decisions or get work done.

Designate a facilitator responsible for ensuring the meeting stays on track. It is important to designate a person responsible for ensuring that the meeting follows the agenda and stays on schedule. The facilitator should also take responsibility for providing quieter members of the group with the chance to speak and to ensure that one or two talkative members don’t take over the meeting. Effective meeting facilitation takes some skill and effort. The facilitator could be the same person each time or could rotate. For particularly contentious meetings, the group may wish to bring in an outside party as a facilitator.

Establish a common understanding of the problem, issue, or question to be addressed. Too many meetings consume time, energy, resources, and good will without reaching closure because different individuals or groups are focused on different problems or concerns. Without a common focus on an agreed-upon task, objective, or problem, those present may stray from useful contributions and are not likely to be able to reach consensus. It is essential that all participants focus on the same problem, in the same way, at the same time.

Establish and follow joint ground rules and develop a common understanding of the process. At its first meeting, the group should jointly agree to ground rules it will follow in discussing items

and making decisions. (Developing ground rules is covered in a separate fact sheet.) Meeting experts recommend that the group agree on the process used for discussion, which will change at different times in the meeting. (As an example of this, the facilitator might say, “If there are no objections, I suggest we develop a list of possible alternatives to the project, which we will not evaluate until we have completed the list.”)

Promote shared decision making. The facilitator should ensure that all members have a chance to speak and be heard. Provide opportunities for members to ask questions of each other and share ideas. Check for group consensus when making decisions.

Follow the agenda. Ask for any additions to the agenda at the beginning of the meeting. Determine what the group’s objectives are for the meeting and make sure the agenda reflects those objectives. Once the agenda is set, follow it to keep the meeting on track and on schedule. Following the agenda also provides the group a sense that something is being accomplished as items are “checked off.”

Take minutes. Minutes provide records of the group’s discussions and decisions. Some meeting experts recommend having a recorder write down key phrases of the discussion on large pieces of newsprint paper as the meeting is conducted, to provide a continuous record the facilitator and participants can refer back to. Using a blackboard or flip chart to record ideas also provides a common focal point for group members, forces the group to clarify ideas, and can provide a sense that the group is making progress. At a minimum, a recorder should write group decisions large enough for everyone to see them on a blackboard or large piece of paper and get consensus on the decision before including them in the minutes. Circulate minutes to each participant and provide members with an opportunity to suggest corrections.

Promote a positive climate. Promote interactions that allow for dealing with disagreements constructively. Dissuade members from making personal attacks on other members. Focus on shared interests and values, not members individual positions and areas of disagreement.

Additional Information

The following sources provide additional helpful information on this topic:

Leading and Communicating: A Guide for Watershed Partnerships, available for \$2 from the Conservation Technology Information Center, West Lafayette, Indiana, Tel. (317) 494-9555.

How To Make Meetings Work, Michael Doyle and David Strauss, 1976 (Jove Books: New York).