Did you know that up to 80% of the work that goes into a meeting occurs before it even begins? We live in an increasingly busy world where we spend countless hours in meetings developing a project, addressing a problem, and working to build community. Continue reading to ensure that your next meeting is a success!
Meetings are where people come together to accomplish specific goals that are outlined in an agenda. Meetings should take place in a comfortable and accessible location. Ninety minutes is considered the maximum amount of time for a meeting to last without including breaks in the agenda. The litmus test for any successful meeting is that when people leave, they are glad they came, and that requires preparation. Follow these tips to run effective, successful meetings.

Preparing for the Meeting:

Meeting Purpose
What is the reason for the meeting? What are you trying to accomplish during this time? People attend the meeting hoping to learn something or because they want to pass on information to other people. Meetings are also used as a time to get work done. Frequently, meetings provide a forum for planning and decision making. To identify the specific purpose of the meeting, ask, “What do I want people to walk away knowing when this meeting concludes?”

Participation
Once you clarify the purpose, it is easier to figure out who needs to be there. Ask, “Who has to attend if we are to accomplish our meeting purpose?” It may be that there is an established list of participants. If not, consider inviting those who can contribute valuable wisdom on the subject matter. Ask, “Who has experience with the situation?” Or “Whose interests are at stake in this meeting?” If there is someone who has to be there (e.g. a speaker, public official, or facilitator), check their schedules before setting the date.

Getting people to attend your meeting is vital. Generally, an email or flyer by itself does not ensure people will put aside their regular demands to attend the meeting. A personal follow-up call often motivates people to attend. Neighborhood associations commonly use yard signs to announce an upcoming community meeting. About a week ahead of time, place a sign with the meeting details outside of the school or hall where the meeting will be held. This way, as people drive or walk by, they will be reminded of the upcoming meeting. See the “E-Communication” tool and “Marketing and Promotion” tools for more tips on promoting your meeting. If you are having trouble getting people to attend your organization’s meeting, try awarding an attendance prize. Purchase, or ask a local merchant to donate, a gift certificate and hold a drawing at the end of the meeting. The winner must be present to win. This will help boost attendance. If your budget
allows, having refreshments at the meeting usually helps boost attendance as well.

Prepare an Agenda
Thinking ahead about the meeting agenda is critical. Once the purpose is clear and you have thought about potential participants, you are ready to draft an agenda. Create your agenda by basing it on a project work plan or by asking participants to submit agenda items in advance. When developing the agenda, be sure to have the meeting’s purpose clearly defined. Every agenda item should support the purpose. For more information, see the “Meeting Agendas” tool.

Always use an agenda, no matter the group size, and circulate it in advance whenever possible. If you cannot make copies of the agenda for everyone, write it on a flip chart for all to see. The agenda should include topics for discussion, who will lead the discussion, and the time allotted for each topic. It is often a good idea to open the meeting with a brief ice breaker or a general discussion question to make participants feel more comfortable with each other. See the “Meeting Ice Breakers & Exercises” tool for more information.

Meeting Materials
Consider what information people need in advance of the meeting. Send materials to all participants prior to the meeting so they come prepared to make informed decisions. Bring to the meeting any necessary meeting supplies such as extra copies of the agenda, maps, worksheets, name tags, markers, pens, flip chart, and refreshments.

Meeting Location & Room Arrangement
Meetings should be held in comfortable, easy-to-find locations. When identifying a meeting location, think about convenience to the most number of participants, accessibility, safety, and what might be the most hospitable environment. Ideal locations may include libraries, churches, or community centers.

Arrive early to the meeting so you can rearrange the chairs in a way that facilitates discussion. If you are using tables, place them so people can see face-to-face. Be sure to also set up your flip chart and hang any related materials such as a neighborhood map.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Meeting Roles</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator/Chairperson/President: Leads the agenda, opens and closes the meeting, and guides the discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenter: Shares facts and information relevant to the group. The presenter may not be a regular member of the group, but is brought in to share information about a specific issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recorder: Records comments in a public way by writing them on a flip chart.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note-taker: Documents ideas, comments, decisions, and actions in meeting minutes. May be responsible for the distribution of the minutes within a week of the meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timekeeper: Enforces time limits to keep the agenda on track. The facilitator may or may not perform this role.</td>
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</tbody>
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During the Meeting:

Start on Time
It’s important to start on time so that you can finish on time. Doing so will respect people’s time and reward good behavior.

Meeting Minutes
Minutes are the traditional way to keep track of a group’s decisions and progress. Assign a note-taker at the beginning of each meeting if you do not already have someone in the secretary or recorder role. See the “Meeting Minutes” tool for more information.

Consider Using a Facilitator
Having the chairperson or president run the meeting may not always be a good idea. The chairperson is usually integrally involved in the issues and goals, so also being responsible for the process of the meeting may be too much to handle. Consider asking a facilitator to make sure everyone is engaged and the meeting flows smoothly. If you can’t find a facilitator, consider appointing a meeting manager within the group or rotating this role among group members who have these skills. Think of a meeting manager as a traffic cop—they guide the process and encourage good behavior. Rotating the meeting manager role may also help build responsibility, group cohesion and leadership skills in others. The facilitator should follow these tips:

⇒ Share your opinion only after everyone else contributes.
⇒ Learn to neutralize problem people.
⇒ Be a model meeting participant.
⇒ Encourage diversity of view points.

Plan for Different Communication Styles
We know that people have different learning and communication styles. Some people are very willing to voice their opinions, and most meeting styles cater to these people. There are others who may not say a word and prefer to process information internally, thinking it over before speaking. With a few minor changes to a meeting structure, you can create opportunities for everyone to participate, and not just the outspoken ones. Small groups may be helpful for major discussions or planning exercises and will help everyone to speak and feel comfortable in a smaller setting. If you don’t need an immediate decision, you may also consider encouraging members to think about the issue after the meeting and send their ideas and opinions to you in written form. You can then pull those ideas together and have them ready for the next meeting.

Stick to the Agenda
The role of the chairperson, president or facilitator is to keep the group on the agenda
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and on task. You’ve worked hard to develop the agenda. Do stick to it so that you have results to show at the end of the meeting! But that’s not always easy. What happens when an issue is going nowhere or someone goes off on a tangent? Impose a “5 or 10 minute rule” so participants can call the rule when discussion is repetitive or unproductive. You may also want to use a flip chart labeled “Parking Lot” to place non-agenda items and decide whether or not to handle them at the end of the meeting or at a future one.

Use Flip Charts or Wall Notes for Group Memory
Sometimes it is useful to record notes publicly so participants can keep track of the discussion as it takes place. Wall notes—chalkboards, flips charts or butcher block paper—are great visual tools to help group members focus on the issues and stay on track. Using a flip chart ensures the ideas are recorded accurately, creates an instant record of the meeting progress, and helps members feel that their ideas are heard. The tool can also help latecomers catch up without interrupting the meeting.

Here are a few “tricks of the trade.”
⇒ Write down what members say—not your own interpretation. Remember that these are the group’s notes and not yours! If in doubt, check with the group to make sure that what is written captures the meaning expressed.
⇒ Use verbs and make phrases fairly complete, if possible. You don’t need complete sentences, but you want the flip chart to convey meaning, even to someone who was not at the meeting.
⇒ Write in black, blue or other dark colors. Avoid pale markers that are hard to see from a distance. Experienced flip-charters often use different colors to signify a change in topic or a different agenda item. Try to write in large letters and avoid script, unless you have great handwriting. And don’t worry too much about spelling every word correctly—as long as the word is recognizable!
⇒ Do your best to write quickly and allow the discussion to go on while you are writing. If members think they need to stop and wait for you to finish before saying anything else, the meeting may lose momentum.
⇒ Post the flip charts around the room so people can keep track of what has been discussed.

Know How Decisions Will Be Made and Document Your Decisions
You’ve been talking and talking—and now you’re ready to make a decision. But do you know how? Will you vote … come to consensus … or what? There are several different ways to make decisions, but it’s important that the group knows what to expect and understands the process. Check out the “Consensus Building” tool for
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more information.

We’ve all been in long meetings when the discussion drags on … and by the time we finally decide, everyone is exhausted, grabs their coats and heads for the door! But later, no one is sure exactly what they agreed to. To ensure everyone understands, make sure the group takes time to agree on what they agreed on. Confirm the exact wording and make sure it’s in the minutes. If it’s a controversial decision, you may want to go a step further – record it on a flipchart and have everyone initial it before they leave.

After the Meeting:

It is a good idea to evaluate what worked and what didn’t after each meeting. This reflection and feedback will be very useful as you plan future meetings.

Consider ending the meeting by asking the group, “What worked well? What might have made this meeting more successful?” Use a flip chart to record their responses. The list will serve as a checklist to plan the next agenda.

Evaluate What Worked and What Needs Improvement
After the meeting, ask yourself the following questions:
⇒ Did the meeting seem like it was planned in advance?
⇒ Were minutes from the previous meeting made available?
⇒ Did the meeting start on time and finish on time?
⇒ Was there a printed agenda distributed to each group member?
⇒ Was there a designated leader? Was someone designated to take notes?
⇒ Was there time for members to get to know other members?
⇒ Was progress made at the meeting?
⇒ Was there a balance between action and planning?
⇒ Did people listen to and respect each other’s opinions and ideas?
⇒ Were people staying actively involved throughout the meeting?
⇒ Were conflicts handled well and constructively?
If you answered “no” to any questions, focus on those when planning the next meeting.

Send Out the Meeting Minutes
The meeting minutes should be compiled and sent out as soon as possible – ideally, within a week. In the minutes, clearly define any action items, who is responsible for carrying them out and the deadline for doing so. See the “Meeting Minutes” tool for more information.

Sources: Oregon State University Extension Service & University of Maine Cooperative Extension
MEETING AGENDAS

An organized agenda is one of the most important ingredients for having an effective meeting. The meeting agenda provides a focus for the meeting and outlines topics to be discussed, persons responsible for leading discussions and the time allotment for each item.

The format of the agenda may depend on the type of organization and whether components are defined by policy or bylaws. Some organizations prefer very brief agendas that primarily serve as outlines, while others use agendas to include brief descriptions of each item. Here are some tips for creating agendas that work:

⇒ Distribute the agenda to members in advance by mail or email. This will allow participants to come to the meeting prepared to discuss and make decisions.

⇒ Identify the person responsible for each item and an estimate of time allotted for discussion. This will ensure that participants who are presenting a report or leading a discussion are aware that they are on the agenda and know how much time they have.

⇒ Arrange the agenda in order of priority. List those items that require immediate attention first, in case time runs short. The early part of every meeting is the most energetic. Agenda items that require discussion and a group decision are best placed early, when the group has more energy. Brief items, such as general information reports or announcements, can be placed first or last on the agenda.

⇒ Be realistic and make the agenda manageable. Do not add more items than what the group can reasonably consider. If you are dealing with issues that require action, be sure to allow enough time for discussion and clarification of ideas.

⇒ Minimize long oral reports of old business by encouraging members and committee chairs to submit written reports.

⇒ End on time—and with a positive agenda item or good news, if possible!

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Agenda

7 p.m. Welcome, introductions, review of agenda (Jim)
7:10 Review, approve last meeting minutes (Jody)
7:15 Treasurer’s report (Jack)
7:20 Update on fundraising campaign (Judy)
7:30 Discussion: Creating goals for next year (Janet)
8:00 Committee report: Marketing (Jill)
8:10 Committee report: Member recruitment (Jeff)
8:20 Announcements (Joe)
8:25 Review of decisions made and tasks or action items due before next meeting (Jim)
8:30 Adjourn

Next meeting date: _____________________

Source: University of Illinois Extension & www.effectivemeetings.com
Establishing meeting guidelines or ground rules early on is an essential tool. Ground rules help a group define how they will work together and treat each other during meetings. Encouraging groups to set their own develops meaningful guidelines that members are committed to following.

**Here’s How:**
Setting ground rules is an easy brainstorming discussion. The facilitator, chair or president should open the discussion by explaining the importance of ground rules. Next, ask each participant to propose a ground rule to be added to the list. Often times, groups display the ground rules in the meeting space or on every agenda so everyone is reminded of them. Everyone in the group helps enforce ground rules, not just the chairperson. Begin your organization’s first meeting by establishing ground rules. For those groups who have been meeting without ground rules, it’s never too late to set them!

*Sample Ground Rules:*
- Meetings start and end at the designated time.
- During the meetings we focus on the agenda items one item at a time.
- Use a “parking lot” (a separate flip chart page) to record any issues or items that are important to remember but not relevant to the current topic or meeting.
- Everyone is encouraged to express his or her viewpoints.
- We listen to each other with respect. One person speaks at a time.
- We seek to understand other points of view by asking questions.
- Disagreement is an opportunity to learn more and make a wiser group decision.
- People who miss a meeting have the responsibility to “catch up” by contacting someone who attended.
- Notes from the meetings are sent within a week after the meeting.

**Dealing with Difficult People**
Even after establishing ground rules, we may occasionally encounter someone who negatively influences the group. It may be somebody who talks too much or someone who discounts the opinions of others and is quick to say their ideas won’t work. To deal with these threats to an effective meeting, at a time when you are not dealing with any specific issues or conflict, ask members to come up with three ways the group might deal with a problem situation (without naming names). Ask, “What are ways to stop someone from over-talking?” Or “How can we encourage a naysayer to be more positive?” Generating these ideas in advance will help everyone deal with the problem as it arises—and may also influence the behavior of difficult people in advance! Keep in mind that being open and honest will prove best for group cohesion. Working to help meetings run effectively and efficiently is everyone’s responsibility!
Whether it is a small get-together or a large meeting, participants want to feel some commonality with those around them. Ice breakers are guided, short activities that help a group become more acquainted with each other. Ice breakers can effectively break tension and encourage interaction between meeting participants. A short activity can help people get comfortable and create a fun atmosphere where all participants voice their ideas with one another.

**Here’s How:**
Ice breakers usually take 10-25 minutes. The meeting facilitator introduces the activity, everyone participates and then the facilitator provides a quick debriefing. Ice breakers can be pure whimsy, or they can relate to the purpose of the meeting.

Most often, ice breakers take place at the beginning of a meeting as part of introductions. In this case, as each person is introducing themselves, they also answer an invented question posed by the facilitator. Examples of these questions include: “What is your favorite food?”, “What color is your toothbrush?”, or “If you could have one wish for your community, what would it be?” Ice breakers can also be used as a re-energizing tool to break up a long meeting.

Not all meeting participants enjoy ice breakers, so the facilitator needs to be sensitive to different people’s feelings in order for everyone to have a positive experience.

**Sample Ice Breakers**

**Eventful Year**
What you’ll need: Enough pennies for every person at the meeting.

This ice breaker works well as part of introductions. The facilitator will pass around pennies so that each participant has one. Going around the room, ask each person to share what year their penny was made and a significant event that occurred to them during that year. For example, Ruth has a penny from the year 1977. During this year, she moved to the neighborhood and her daughter turned three.

After each person has shared, the facilitator should pull it all together into a quick summary and provide a directive for the rest of the meeting.

**M&Ms for a Day**
What you’ll need: A bag of M&Ms.

This ice breaker also works well as part of introductions. The facilitator, chair or president will pass around a bag of M&Ms. Do not provide any instructions, simply
begin to pass the bag around and let people take as many M&Ms as they would like. After everyone has taken some, announce to the group that each person has to share as many things about themselves as they have M&Ms. For example, if Mary took five M&Ms, she will share five things about herself other than her name. If people are having a hard time thinking of things to say about themselves, the facilitator should offer suggestions such as “Tell us how many children you have”, or “Share your favorite cereal or ice cream”.

Some people may take a lot of M&Ms, so it is best to set a limit on the number of things people need to share so you do not get into a time crunch with the rest of your agenda. Once every one has shared, the facilitator should do a quick summary and turn the focus to the next item on the agenda.

**Two Truths and a Lie**
No supplies needed.

Try out this icebreaker for larger group introductions. Have each group member think of two things that are true about themselves and one thing that is not true. When everyone is ready, the first group member will tell the group the three items without revealing which is a lie.

The group will try to guess which statement is false before the individual reveals the answer. Encourage the group to choose facts about themselves that are especially interesting to learn about each other.

**Mad Libs Strategic Planning**
What you’ll need: Scraps of paper and three small boxes.

At a strategic planning or visioning session, have each participant write down two action verbs, two adjectives and two nouns, each on its own piece of paper, related to the meeting topic. Have three boxes, one labeled verbs, one for adjectives, and one for nouns, and put the paper in the appropriate box. Drawing one paper from each box, create short phrases of action items to consider during the planning session.

While this is a fanciful exercise, the phrases often really do make sense for the group’s work. This exercise helps a group think in short, concrete, and action-oriented terms. One note of caution: without talking-down to the participants, it may be a good idea to review the parts of speech and give examples of each.
You enjoy the conversation and camaraderie at meetings, and it seems like a lot of work always gets done, so do you really need official meeting minutes? Yes, you do! Minutes capture the essential information from a meeting—decisions and assigned actions. Without good meeting notes or minutes, you may not remember what was decided, what was accomplished, or who agreed to do what!

The level of detail in your meeting minutes will depend on the type of organization and the expectations of members or any related governing agencies. Do you need to keep track of who attended and did not attend to make sure you have a quorum for key votes? Should you record who made a motion? Do you need to record the actual vote tallies, or can you just indicate whether a measure passed or failed? Take a look at previous organizational meeting minutes to get an idea of what has worked in the past.

Here are a list of key information and tips for just about every organization:

- Consider developing a template in advance of the meeting that will allow you to check off names as members enter the room and record key decisions or actions noted on the agenda. Make sure all of the essential elements are noted, such as the name of the organization, the date and time, name of chairperson, main topics and time of adjournment.

- Focus on action items, not discussion. It’s not necessary to record every single comment. Remember that minutes are the official record of what happened at the meeting—not what was said. Likewise, be objective. Avoid personal observations and only use people’s names for motions, seconds or reports.

- Write up the minutes as quickly as possible, ask the chairperson to review if appropriate, and distribute to members. That way, those who attended can be reminded of action items, and those who did not attend will know what took place.

Your minutes should include this key information:

1. Name of organization
2. Date, time, location
3. Who attended?
4. Who chaired the meeting?
5. What topics were discussed? (Refer to agenda items)
6. What was decided? (Include details of vote if applicable)
7. What follow-up actions were agreed upon?
8. Who is to complete the actions and by when?
9. What information was distributed? (Include link or copies if appropriate)
10. What time did the meeting adjourn?
11. Next meeting date
To continue reading about how to hold effective meetings, check out the following resources.

Effective Meetings
www.effective meetings.com

Kansas University Community Toolbox
http://ctb.ku.edu

Oregon State University Extension Service
Working Together Series
http://extension.oregonstate.edu

Robert’s Rules of Order
http://robertsrules.org/

University of Illinois Extension
The Organized Agenda: A Vital Tool for Efficient Meetings
http://urbanext.illinois.edu/lcr/virtualtool.cfm

University of Maine Cooperative Extension
Group Works: Getting Things Done in Groups
http://umaine.edu

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Office of Quality Improvement
Facilitator Toolkit
http://quality.wisc.edu/effective-meetings.htm