

Organising Successful Meetings

Good meetings are vital to working together as a group, whether this is a campaign group, a self-development group or support group. They can make all the difference between a group feeling motivated and dynamic or a group getting stuck. Meetings that work for everyone involved will make your group more effective as well as being fun. Below you can find some basic steps you can take. For more ideas and an in-depth discussion of the issues involved take a look at our other briefings.

Before the meeting

Meetings can benefit hugely from a little bit of planning and preparation. People organising a meeting need to be clear what the purpose of the meeting is. It could be a one-off event to provide information on say, mental health care, to initiate a campaign or to plan an action. It might be a regular meeting of a well-established group, discussing day-to-business or a specially called meeting to deal with a conflict within the group. When working out the purpose of a meeting, be as clear and concrete as possible. Writing down the purpose in a sentence can help to keep the focus during the meeting. There could of course be several purposes such as a) planning an action, b) attracting new members to the group, c) maintenance tasks such as discussing finance.

The next step is to think about what this particular meeting requires to work well.

When will it happen: Try to find a time that most people are able to make. Think about patterns of daily activity, such as parenting, work, dinner time. If lots of people won't be able come at the same time why not hold two meetings?

Find a venue: The venue needs to be big enough to accommodate everyone, but not too big. It can be very disempowering, when you have hired a huge hall and only twenty people turn up. Ensure the venue for your meeting is accessible and there are clear directions. Take a look at our briefing on access issues.

Letting people know about the meeting: You will need to invite people to your meeting. In a closed group it might be enough tell all members of the group. If you want to attract new people it's time to get thinking about **publicity**. Here are some tips:

- ★ Think about who you are aiming to invite and how best to tell them about it. The publicity needs to be placed where they can see it. For a meeting about new cyclepaths, why not put up posters in bikeshops and on lampposts along cycle routes as well as an article in the local newspaper and radio.
- ★ Is your publicity welcoming people explicitly? Does it encourage people to get involved, to offer their own ideas? Think about the image you are presenting - work on being friendly, interesting and active.
- ★ Make sure to include all important details: where, when, what the purpose of the meeting is, who is organising it and contact details including a telephone number.

Especially when organising large, public meetings or meetings dealing with difficult issues or conflict it is a good idea to think about the agenda, facilitation and decision-making processes you could use in the meeting. You could prepare a rough agenda and think about the order in which to proceed. Remember that this is only a rough proposal - do let people add to it before starting the meeting and prioritise together.

An important role that needs to be filled in all but very small meetings is that of the facilitator. The facilitator helps the group to have an efficient and inclusive meeting by getting the group

to decide on and keep to a structure and process for the meeting. She/he keeps the meeting focussed and regulates the discussion. (For more info please read our briefing *Facilitation*.)

You could decide who will facilitate right at the start of the meeting. However finding a facilitator a few days before or at the previous meeting allows the facilitator to prepare themselves.

All this might sound like a lot of work. If you share out jobs and/or work jointly with someone else, it will reduce stress levels. You'll probably be able to learn something from the other organisers and have fun too.

During the meeting

- ★ Arrange seating in an inclusive way, so that everyone can see one another – some find circles are best. Welcome everyone as they arrive and find out who they are. Introduce yourselves. Some groups have an official welcomer for newcomers.
- ★ Start the meeting by asking everyone to introduce themselves - to say a bit about themselves or why they are here, not just give their names.
- ★ Make sure people know how the meeting works - how are decisions made - consensus or voting? What kind of behaviour is acceptable in this meeting and what isn't.
- ★ Agree on an agenda. You might have prepared a rough proposal. Ask everyone else to add to it. Then, together as a group decide on priorities. You could tackle difficult issues in the middle so people have had a chance to warm up, but are not yet tired. Maybe some of the points can be discussed in smaller working groups. Agree on a time to finish and when to have breaks. Have breaks for reviving (drinks, toilet, fags) and informal chatting, especially when the meeting lasts longer than 1 1/2 hours. Make sure the agenda can be seen by all - use a flipchart. You can cross off points once they are dealt with.
- ★ Take one point at a time, usually starting with a recap on recent events or the last meeting. Summarise regularly and make clear decisions with action points to be carried out by a variety of people.
- ★ Encourage participation at all times so that everyone can get involved and contribute to the meeting. Use tools such as brainstorming, go-rounds, small groups.
- ★ Challenge put downs and discriminatory remarks.
- ★ Don't let three people do all the talking or have everyone talking at the same time. Use tools such as go-rounds, talking sticks etc.
- ★ Don't let the meeting get angry - have breaks for cooling off or split into pairs/small groups.
- ★ Try to keep discussions positive, but don't ignore conflict - deal with it before it grows. See briefings on conflict resolution and problems in meetings.
- ★ Make sure the meeting finishes on time or get everyone's agreement to continue. Pass round a list for contact details so that you can send out minutes and inform people about future meetings. Decide on a date, time and venue for the next meeting. You might want to decide on points to be discussed at that meeting. Remember to thank everyone for turning up and contributing. You could continue with an informal social activity like sharing a meal or going to the pub.

After the meeting

Send minutes to everyone who was at the meeting. Don't forget those people who could not make it, but would like to be kept informed. Be sure to include any action points as well as thanking people for their contributions. You could also get together with the other organisers to evaluate the meeting. What went well, what needs to be improved? Celebrate what you have achieved!

Tools for involving people in meetings

Here are a few simple tools you can use to involve people more in the meeting. For more ideas please have a look at our **Briefing on Tools For Meetings**.

Go-round: Everyone takes a turn to speak without interruption or comment from other people. This tool can be used in many situations - for the initial gathering of opinions and ideas, for finding out people's feelings, for slowing down the discussion and improving listening. Go-rounds benefit from a facilitator, who ensures that everyone gets a chance to speak.

It helps to establish clearly what the purpose/question of the go-round is - write it on a flipchart for everyone to see. You can either set a time limit for everyone speaking or let people speak as long as they want.

Brainstorms: This tool helps to quickly gather a large number of ideas. It encourages creativity and frees energy. Start by stating the issue to be brainstormed. Ask people to say whatever comes into their heads as fast as possible - without censoring it. The crazier the ideas the better. This helps people to be inspired by each other. Have one or two note takers to write all the ideas down where everyone can see them. Make sure there is no discussion or comment on others' ideas. Structured thinking and organising can come afterwards.

Mapping: Use large writing where everyone can see it. Arrange key words in groups or out on their own. Use connecting arrows, colours, pictures. This is a lot more organic and fun than a simple list. It can allow people to make new connections. The writing could be done by one person or everyone in the group.

Splitting into smaller groups or pairs: Sometimes a large group can become dominated by a few people or ideas, stifling creativity and the contributions of others. It can be very difficult to discuss emotionally charged issues in a large group. Also many topics could be discussed more effectively in a smaller focus group - for example the details of lay-outing the newsletter or organising the benefit-gig. Smaller groups allow time for everyone to speak and to feel involved. They are a lot less intimidating too.

Think about the sort of group you need - a random split (eg numbering off) or specific interest groups? Explain clearly what you want groups to do. Write specific questions/topics on a flipchart beforehand and give them to each group. If you are going to have feedback at the end, you need to say clearly what they need to feedback. You could also ask people to split into pairs.

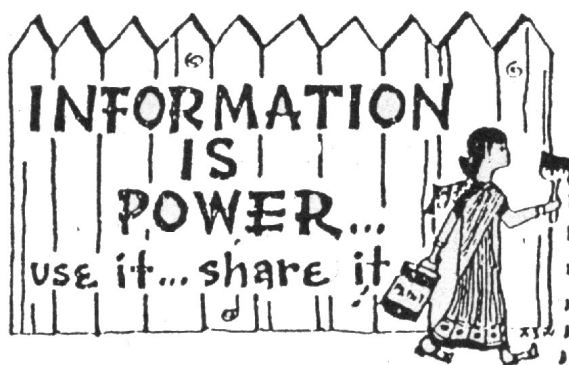
Energisers: When people stop concentrating or become irritable in a meeting, this could simply be because they have been sitting and listening for too long. A stretch, a game, two

minutes chatting to your neighbour can re-energise people. Be sensitive to the audience though - the aim is to get their attention focussed again afterwards, not to be embarrassed or feel isolated. Never coerce people into playing games - respect limits and boundaries.

Talking sticks: You can use a stick or a conch shell or almost any other distinctive object. People may speak only when they hold the talking stick. When finished the speaker passes the stick to next person who wants to speak. This tool makes people conscious of when they interrupt others and helps them to break the habit. It also allows people to consider and take their time in voicing their views as they don't have to be afraid that some one else might jump in.

For more briefings on grassroots activism
and to find out about free workshops
have a look at our website:

www.seedsforchange.org.uk



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