

Running Effective Committee Meetings

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Meetings are necessary for:

- Decision making;
- Reporting;
- Review;
- Problem solving; and
- Discussion.

In reality running purposeful and participative meetings can be challenging. Common experiences include:

- Long discussions with no conclusion;
- Decision making on the basis of inadequate information;
- Low attendance;
- Uneven participation; and
- Unwillingness to ask questions.

These issues are not easily addressed, but meetings can become more effective if they are well planned with a clear purpose, effectively chaired and focused on decision-making.

Planning Meetings

Committee meetings are more productive if they are planned beforehand. Responsibility for planning the meeting lies with the Chairperson along with the Secretary in smaller organizations, and with the most senior staff member in organizations which employ staff. However all Management Committee members will need to ensure they have read any papers prior to the meeting and have added relevant items to the agenda.

Plan your meetings effectively by....

- Setting dates well in advance to maximize the number of members available to attend (and sending a reminder notice);
- Clarifying the purpose or focus of the meeting;
- Ensuring that staff and financial reports are concise and comprehensible;
- Ensuring that minutes and agreed actions from the previous meetings are circulated.
- Ensuring that all papers are circulated well in advance;

- Agreeing on the meeting agenda in advance.
- Identifying which agenda items require a decision and which are for information or discussion; and
- Identifying the purpose of meetings.

Planning your meetings is easier if the purpose of each meeting is clear.

Committee meetings are for:

- Monitoring and reviewing progress towards meeting the aims of the organization;
- Monitoring financial performance;
- Ensuring all activities are consistent with the organization's purpose and mission;
- Considering applications for membership of the organization;
- Planning annual general meetings;
- Initiating and reviewing internal and external policy positions and statements;
- Deciding on management and governance systems and processes;
- Deciding the most appropriate methods of funding raising and considering applications for funding;
- Delegating work;
- Discussing and making decisions on new proposals;
- Planning for the future and identifying new opportunities;
- Delegating work; and
- Deciding on appropriate staffing requirements, staff terms and conditions.

However, each individual meeting may focus on one or two issues. Is there one or more topics or proposals which require a decision? Should the financial report or the staff report be considered early in an upcoming meeting because they were at the bottom of the agenda at the last meeting and did not receive sufficient attention?

A well planned agenda should clearly communicate the purpose and objectives of the meeting.

Effective Chairing

Chairing is a key factor in the effectiveness of meetings.

The role of the Chair is to direct discussion of the Committee, ensuring that the objectives of the meeting can be met, and that the Committee effectively fulfills its responsibility in consideration of the items on the agenda. This involves ensuring that you are well briefed about each agenda item and that:

- decisions are taken, recorded and carried out;
- the organization's policies are applied;
- there is full participation;

- the agenda is followed; and
- there are time limits for the meeting as a whole and for agenda items.

Productive meetings require the contribution of all members of the Management Committee, working as a team and taking joint responsibility for ensuring that issues are given due consideration and decisions taken. More detail is provided in an attachment on the Chair's responsibilities.

Decision Making

Some committees are responsible for making major strategic decisions and need to make decisions jointly with other members. In making any big decision, a number of steps are involved, including some or all of the following:

- Information – ensure that the committee has read or heard all relevant information;
- The goal - what is our aim and is it consistent with the aim and direction of the organization. Agreement on the goal is a crucial stage in decision making;
- Choices - what choices are available to us and what are the constraints; and
- The plan - how do we achieve our goal - what are the steps and what resources do we need.

There are other situations where it is sensible to delegate the power to make day to day decisions to an individual or to a working group for example to work out the details of carrying out a policy which the whole committee has agreed to.

Decision making is much more effective if the committee establishes not only what is to be done but also how and when it will be done and by whom.

There are two common methods of making decisions:

1. By consensus; and
2. By taking a vote.

Some organizations have a strong commitment to consensual decision making and only take a vote in exceptional circumstances. Others routinely vote on issues.

Regardless of how decisions are made, all committee members should be clear about exactly **what has been decided** and **decisions should be clearly noted in the minutes**.

Don't forget. Each committee member has a contribution to make to effective meetings. All members should:

- Prepare for meetings;
- Forward apologies if you are unable to attend;

- Use your agenda;
- Listen to the speakers;
- Learn from other people;
- Speak up when you have something to say;
- Ask questions if you are unclear or unsure;
- Consider all the options and share your views; and
- Abide by decisions which are taken, whether you agree with them or not.

The Chair's Responsibilities

One of the most important roles of the Chairperson is steering a Committee through its business effectively and efficiently. A good Chair will be mindful of the following basic points!

Before the Meeting

1. Plan the agenda with the chief officer and officers. Include items brought to you by other members. Decide the order and timing of the agenda, and who will introduce each one.
2. Identify which agenda items are for information, discussion or a decision.
3. Be well briefed about each item, and actions taken since the last meeting.
4. Ensure all necessary background papers (including the last meeting's minutes) are sent out with the agenda beforehand.
5. Check with staff that all relevant practical arrangements have been made, e.g. room layout, visual aids, etc.
6. Arrive in good time before the meeting is due to start.

During the Meeting

Communicate

- Start the meeting. Welcome any new members. Make any necessary introductions.
- Receive apologies for absence.
- Ensure that additions or amendments to minutes are recorded.
- Set the scene. State the objectives of the meeting and each item.
- Try to be brief when making a point.

Control

- Maintain control. Set out any time limits.
- Allow flexibility and freedom of expression.
- Keep to the agenda.
- Ensure quorum is present.
- Ensure time is used effectively.
- Ensure that proper minutes are taken.

Coax

- Ensure full participation.
- Draw out quieter members and discourage those who are monopolising the meeting.
- Be prepared to highlight issues that no-one else will, and to be the one who always has to ask the awkward questions.

Compare

- Weigh up contributions impartially.
- All statements in favor of a point should be summarized along with all points not in favor.

Clarify

- Ensure everyone understands what is being discussed.
- Summarize.
- Ensure that if jargon and abbreviations are used, all present understand them.
- Ensure that decisions are recorded, together with who is going to implement them. It can be useful to record decisions on a flip-chart as they are made.

Decision Making

- Ensure that decisions are taken in the context of the organisations strategy and that they are recorded, together with who is going to implement them.

Guide

- Remember that above all you are there to guide the meeting.
- Steer members to work harmoniously and purposefully as a team.
- Keep an eye on time.

At the End of the Meeting

1. Summarize decisions taken and action points to be followed up e.g. who's responsible, by when.
2. Agree a date for the next meeting - it is usually best to set dates for the year's meetings well in advance.
3. Agree what special items will be put on the agenda of the next meeting and what work needs to be done, by whom etc.
4. Ensure that the minutes are written up, checked by the Chair and sent out in good time.

The Secretary's Responsibilities

The Secretary is crucial to the smooth running of a Committee meeting. This involves activities before, during and after Committee meetings.

In order to be effective, the Secretary of the Committee should ensure that they carry out the following activities:

Before the Meeting

- Consult with the Chairperson on the order of business for the meeting, and the way in which it should be dealt with on the agenda. Decide what business requires discussion and what requires a decision by the Committee;
- Ensure that the notice of the meeting is given;
- Circulate to all members (a) any papers to be discussed at the upcoming meeting and (b) a copy of the agenda, minutes of the previous meeting; and
- Make sure that any reports or information requested at the last meeting is available or that there is a good reason why not.

At the Meeting

- Arrive in good time before the meeting with the minutes and with all the relevant correspondence and business matters for that meeting. Record the names of those who are present, and convey and record apologies received from those who are absent;
- Obtain approval of the minutes of the previous meeting, and if they are approved, note that fact;
- Report on actions or matters arising from the previous minutes. Read any important correspondence that has been received;
- Unless there is a Minutes Secretary, take notes of the meeting, recording the key points and making sure that all decisions and proposals are recorded, as well as the name of the person or group responsible for carrying them out. Make sure action points are clear; and
- Make sure that the Chairperson is supplied with all the necessary information for items on the agenda, and remind the Chairperson if an item has been overlooked.

After the Meeting

- Prepare a draft of the minutes (unless there is a minutes secretary) and consult the Chairperson and most senior staff member (where relevant) for approval;
- Send a reminder notice of each decision requiring action to the relevant person; this can be done by telephone, or by an 'action list' with the relevant action for each person duly marked; and
- Promptly send all correspondence as decided by the Management Committee.

Checklist - What Committee Members Need Before a Meeting

All Committee members should receive the following before a meeting takes place:

- ✓ **Notice of the meeting.** Dates for Committee meetings should be set well in advance! Although this sounds obvious, no matter how often the dates are agreed, some committee members still seem to say “I didn’t have the date in my diary”. In order for a meeting to be effective all committee members really need to be present. It will also be at the top of the agenda for the next meeting. It is a good idea to send a number of reminders of the dates of meetings. Some groups have their meetings on for example, the first Wednesday of every month, which means a pattern can be established.
- ✓ **Minutes of the previous meeting.** The minutes are an essential record of what happened and what was decided at the previous meeting. It is important that minutes are prepared well, giving an accurate account of the most important actions and decisions taken at that meeting. The headings in the minutes should refer to the points on the relevant agenda. For you as a committee member, receiving the minutes should not be a routine act of looking them over and forgetting about them. Read them over carefully to make sure they are an accurate record - has anything important been left out? Are there matters arising from the minutes that you want to discuss further at the next meeting? Are there points for action that you have to deal with before the next meeting? Make some notes, then store the minutes in the relevant file and bring it to the next meeting.
- ✓ **Agenda for the forthcoming meeting.** You should have already contributed to this agenda. In your orientation you will have been told how to get items on the agenda for a meeting, e.g. by mentioning your items to the Chairperson after a meeting, or by calling the Secretary by a certain date. An agenda simply lists the topics or issues that will be discussed at the meeting, and should give shape and direction to the meeting.
- ✓ **Any relevant papers.** Written reports and other written materials will often accompany the agenda circulated prior to a Management Committee meeting. These relevant papers might include:
 - Work reports on key outcomes/outputs
 - Financial reports Source
 - Options paper (e.g. outline of various options related to a specific topic, and
 - How each option is likely to affect the organization)

Committee members should read any papers circulated before the meeting, and it should be clear which papers are for information purposes and which are for discussion purposes. This will enable Committee members to be well prepared, with any questions or comments prepared prior to the meeting.

Format of the Minutes or Notes of the Meeting

1. Title of meeting
2. Date, time, venue
3. People present
4. Apologies for absence
5. Corrections to Minutes of previous meeting
6. Actions relating to previous meeting
7. Items on the agenda
8. Items to be discussed and decided
9. Date, time and venue of next meeting

Format of the Agenda for the Meeting

1. Title of meeting
2. Date, time, venue
3. Apologies for absence
4. Minutes of previous meeting
5. Actions relating to previous meeting
6. Items to be discussed and decided
7. Reports from sub-groups
8. Any other business
9. Date, time and venue of next meeting