

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE MEETINGS**

- The atmosphere is informal, relaxed, and comfortable. People are involved and interested. There are no signs of boredom or tension.
- There is a great deal of discussion in which everyone participates. The discussion stays relevant to the topic(s) at hand. If the discussion gets off the subject, someone quickly brings it back.
- The task or objective of the team is well understood and accepted by participants. Participants are committed to achieving it.
- Participants really listen to each other.
- Disagreement is expressed openly and without fear of conflict. Differences of opinion are honored and thoroughly explored before decisions are made. If differences cannot be resolved, participants agree to live with them and move on.
- Decisions are reached by consensus. Formal majority voting is not used.
- Criticism of ideas is frequent, frank, and phrased constructively. Participants avoid personal attacks.
- People are encouraged to express their feelings as well as their thoughts. There are no hidden agendas and few surprises, since participants are open about sharing their feelings.
- When action is agreed upon, clear assignments are made and participants accept individual accountability.
- The facilitator does not dominate interaction. Participants do not defer unduly to the facilitator. All participants exercise leadership responsibilities.
- The group is highly conscious of its own internal processes. Frequently, it will stop to examine how well it is doing and take a look at things that may be interfering with its functioning. Problems are discussed openly until a solution is found.

## **KEY MEETING ROLES**

### **Meeting Facilitator**

Responsibilities: To begin and end the meeting on time; to keep the meeting focused on results; to keep the meeting moving; to model and use facilitative behaviors; to keep discussion on track; to keep the discussion balanced; to summarize; to encourage all participants to contribute; and to listen, look for, and point out areas of agreement. See "Role of Meeting Facilitator," below, for more details.

### **Recorder/Minute Taker**

Responsibilities: To record ideas and suggestions made by participants, to record agreements and decisions reached, to seek out clarification when necessary.

### **Timekeeper**

Responsibilities: To keep track of time spent on agenda items, to warn leader or facilitator when time is running out.

## Participant

Responsibilities: To contribute to the meeting in a constructive way; to share information that is useful; to listen carefully to other points of view; and to pay attention to both task and process functions.

## **ROLE OF MEETING FACILITATOR**

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Co-op meetings don't have "someone in charge"; they have facilitators. The board president is usually the meeting facilitator, but the board can assign the facilitator role to anyone. A facilitator is a member who steps out of the decision making to focus on the meeting process, how the discussion runs. **Skilled facilitating keeps a meeting focused, moving, and productive.**

Small meetings are generally easy to facilitate; large meetings are tougher. Start small and gain experience. With practice and attention, anyone can become a great facilitator.

Here's a quick checklist of the facilitator's role:

- Make the meeting space comfortable.
- Provide meeting supplies (extra handouts, newsprint, tape, etc.)
- Start and keep the meeting on time.
- Move the group from one agenda item to the next.
- Recognize people and give them their opportunity to speak.
- Keep issues clear and manageable.
- Make sure that people stick to the issue.
- Encourage positive attitudes.
- Make sure that everyone participates.
- Sum up discussion points.
- End discussion if a decision cannot be made.

The following outlines a facilitator's job in detail. All of the listed goals are necessary, but the tools are suggestions. Experiment and learn as you go.

## **FOCUS**

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It's the facilitator's job to stay out of the debate and keep discussions on track. An unfocused meeting quickly becomes inefficient and frustrating.

1. Separate yourself (as facilitator) from the discussion. Try not to add content to the discussion. As facilitator, your role is to focus on the process.
  - If you know that you have a strong personal stake in a proposal, ask someone else to facilitate the meeting.
  - If you give any personal input, start by saying, "Stepping out of my facilitator role. . . ." It is important that people do not give your opinion more weight because you are acting as facilitator.
2. Keep the issue clear and manageable.

- Start the discussion with a time for “clarifying questions.” This is a time for people to make sure they understand the issues or proposals, not to discuss them.
  - Break large, complicated issues or proposals into smaller parts.
  - Post the agenda or steps needed to reach a decision where everyone can see them.
3. Make sure people stick to the issue.
    - Keep a “parallel agenda” or “parking lot” if unrelated issues come up. Jot down notes of concern. Later, you can address these issues quickly, or pass them to a committee, or table them for a future meeting.
  4. Keep speakers from repeating points that have already been made.
    - Write points on a large pad of newsprint or a whiteboard.
  5. Keep the meeting moving. Be aware of time.
    - Set time limits for each agenda item.
    - Choose a timekeeper.
    - Remind people how much time remains. If you run out of time, have members either extend the time limit or set another time to continue the discussion. If you extend the time, have the members decide if the meeting will go longer or what will be tabled for another time.

## **PARTICIPATION**

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It's the facilitator's job to recognize speakers and get everyone involved. The more points of view that are expressed and then addressed, the stronger final decisions can be. Everyone has valid opinions. Everyone can have creative solutions.

1. Recognize speakers; call on people to speak in turn.
  - Keep a “stack.” Write down people's names as they raise their hands and use that list to call on people in turn. People may not get to speak at the exact moment they want, but they will understand that the system is fair.
2. Make sure everyone gets a chance to speak.
  - Go around the circle, giving each person a brief, uninterrupted chance to speak.
  - Ask questions to prompt quiet members to speak.
  - Break the discussion group into smaller groups so it's less intimidating.
  - Try to have everyone speak once before anyone speaks a second time.
  - Clarify the issue under discussion as needed.
3. Encourage everyone to speak his or her mind.
  - If someone seems to be holding back, try to engage them in the discussion.
  - Give people easy ways to participate. Ask the group a question and have people show thumbs: thumbs up means agree, in favor, and thumbs down means disagree, against. Thumbs to the side means unsure, neutral.
4. Encourage creativity, especially when discussions get stuck.

- Hold brainstorms where everyone adds to a list of ideas without any evaluation. The group can discuss specific ideas after the brainstorm.

## **POSITIVE ATTITUDES**

It's the facilitator's role to set the tone of the meeting. Good meetings are relaxed, organized, friendly, and fun.

- Keep discussions from getting too heated by scheduling breaks.
- Give positive feedback.
- Discourage nonconstructive feedback and criticism.
- Refer to points and proposals by titles, not the names of the person who presented them.
- Make the space comfortable.

## **PULL IT ALL TOGETHER**

It's the facilitator's role to achieve clarity before the group makes a decision. This is one of the most important parts of facilitating—and often the hardest.

1. Sum up what's been said; in voting, review points of opposing proposals; in consensus, repeat points to be addressed and solutions.

- Use a whiteboard or flipchart to list points of the proposal(s).
  - Review important points of the discussion (on paper or orally). This way the group can see how the decision has been reached.
  - Know if or when a decision cannot be made. The people may need more facts, opinions from others, or time to think.
  - Ask members what they need or want to feel comfortable making a decision.
2. Make sure everyone understands the decision.
- Restate the decision. Ask for group approval. Make sure the recorder writes it down exactly.

## **BOARD MEETING FACILITATION TIPS**

Good facilitation makes all the difference between feeling energized or drained by a meeting. Strong facilitation helps all members participate equally. Although leading a board discussion is usually the president's job, facilitation may be assigned to any person who has a knack for watching the clock and the agenda, and for encouraging everyone to participate in discussions.

Running meetings and managing them well is not something that anyone is born knowing how to do; it is an acquired skill that takes talent and experience. With time, each facilitator discovers his or her own strengths and style. Don't be hesitant to secure (and be willing to pay for) outside help if you need it.

The basic job of the facilitator is threefold: Begin the meeting on time, keep the meeting moving, and end the meeting on time.

### **Begin the meeting on time.**

- Allow some time for small talk and settling in.

sus comes only after open discussion and acknowledging differences.

- **Listen** carefully for agreements and hesitations within the group. When a decision can't be made, state points of agreement and hesitation. Stating points of agreement helps group morale, may lead to agreement "in principle" on the issue, and may make it possible to agree on new ideas. Stating points of hesitation can make them clearer and allow for resolution. Many times, hesitations are based on misunderstanding and restating can end those misunderstandings.
- **Test** for agreement as soon as a decision seems to be emerging. State the tentative consensus in a question and be specific. For example: "Do we all agree that we'll meet on Tuesday nights for the next two months, and that a facilitator will be chosen at each meeting for the next one?" rather than "Do we all agree to do this the way it was just suggested?" If you are unclear about how to phrase the decision, ask for help.
  - Insist on a response from the group. Don't accept silence or grunting for consent. Participants need to be conscious of making a contract with each other.
  - Sometimes stating the perceived agreement in the negative helps to clarify the group feeling: "Is there anyone who does not agree that...?" This method is especially helpful for groups under time pressure or with a tendency for nit-picking, but it is also important for group members to be fully supportive of the decision. If you have doubts about their commitment, ask them.
  - Be suspicious of agreements reached too easily. Test to make sure members really do agree on essential points.
- **Offer alternatives** when there is no agreement.
- Ask those who disagree to offer alternative proposals for discussion and decision.
- If an agreement still cannot be reached, people may need time to reflect on the feelings behind their opinions. Propose a break or a period of silence, or postpone the discussion.
- If postponing the decision, try to reach an agreement on a process for what will happen before an item is brought up again. It is often productive for representatives of opposing factions to draft a compromise proposal together.

There are many models of consensus-based decision making, and the one described below is just one of them. The idea behind this model is to avoid having anyone leave the table feeling disgruntled, excluded, or dismissed. This model isn't appropriate for every decision you make, but it can be helpful for times where you're dealing with potentially divisive issues.

When making a decision, instead of voting “yes” or “no,” have everyone express support for the decision in terms of a number between 1 and 5:

5 = I feel strongly about this and will take the lead to make sure it happens.

4 = I feel strongly about this, and will work to make sure it happens.

3 = I am okay with this.

2 = I am not okay with this, but will not stop it.

1 = I am opposed to this, and will work to prevent it from happening.

After everyone has voted, tally and share the responses with the group. Begin by asking the 1s and 2s to share their concerns. Ask them to relate their opinion directly to the values, goals, and objectives of the cooperative. Then ask the 4s and 5s to share their viewpoints and do the same thing. The goal is to share viewpoints until everyone in the group is comfortable with the decision. Even in a consensus decision-making process, the group may opt to overrule a single member or small group that stands in the way of where the others feel strongly the organization should go. Also, if there are no 5s, you may ask if the proposal is a good idea to begin with.

## **GROUND RULES FOR MEETINGS**

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It's a good idea to set some formal meeting ground rules that everyone agrees to abide by. Like the code of ethics, ground rules describe the highest level of behavior that meeting participants should practice at all times, but that may be forgotten in the heat of discussion.

- Arrive on time. Stay until the end.
- Begin all meetings on time.
- Start the meeting with introductions and an explanation of the meeting process.
- Come prepared, having read all relevant materials beforehand.
- Recognize and state when you have a conflict of interest. Do not vote on any motion in which you have a stated conflict of interest.
- Make no judgmental statements.
- Seek to understand before being understood.
- Speak respectfully. Never raise your voice above a normal speaking tone.
- Talk to the issue, not to the person.
- Don't criticize those who are absent.
- Ask questions when you do not understand. There are no stupid questions.
- Take turns speaking. Try not to speak again until everyone else has had a chance to speak.
- Don't speak at the same time. Don't interrupt.
- State your motions positively. Try to pair a solution with every problem.
- People can disagree without being disrespectful. Everyone needs to be heard and respected, but that does not mean everyone gets his or her own way.
- Talk about meeting issues at the meeting, not in the parking lot after the meeting.
- End all meetings on time.
- Thank all attendees for their support and dedication.

## ROBERTS RULES OF ORDER

Robert's Rules of Order is a time-proven tool for meeting process. You don't have to be a parliamentary whiz to use basic concepts that help you stick to an agenda and finish the meeting in an hour or two. The table shown below summarizes the most commonly used parliamentary procedures. Adopting these, even informally, can often help at times when discussions stray from the business at hand, or when conflict becomes stressful.

Process	Following parliamentary procedure, one says:	Need a second?	Is it debatable?	Can it be amended?	What vote is needed?
Introduce business	"I move that . . ."	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority
Motion by committee	"Finance committee moves . . ."	No	Yes	Yes	Majority
Suspend further consideration of an issue	"I move to table the motion."	Yes	No	No	Majority
Postpone discussion for a certain time	"I move to postpone the discussion until . . ."	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority
Amend a motion on the table	"I move to amend the motion by . . ."	Yes	Only if motion is debatable	Yes	Majority
End a debate and amendments	"I call the question."	Yes	No	No	2/3
Give closer study to something	"I move to refer the matter to the committee."	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority
Adjourn a meeting	"I move that we adjourn."	Yes	No	No	Majority

### Motions that occur occasionally

Process	Following parliamentary procedure, one says:	Need a second?	Is it debatable?	Can it be amended?	What vote is needed?
Protest breach of conduct	"I rise to a point of order."	No	No	No	No vote
Vote on a ruling of the chair	"I appeal the chair's decision."	Yes	Yes	No	Majority
Suspend rules temporarily	"I move to suspend the rules so that . . ."	Yes	No	No	2/3
Avoid considering an improper matter	"I object to consideration of this motion."	No	No	No	2/3
Request information	"Point of information."	No	No	No	No vote
Take up a previously tabled matter	"I move to take from the table . . ."	Yes	No	No	Majority
Reconsider an action the vote on . . ."	"I move to reconsider the vote on . . ."	Yes	Yes	No	Majority

## **TROUBLESHOOTING A PROBLEM MEETING**

<b>Problem</b>	<b>Solution</b>
Lack of agenda	Send a written agenda in advance to all meeting participants, increasing the odds that people will come to the meeting prepared.
Poor attendance	Were you clear about the meeting date, time, and location? Did you invite the correct people to the meeting? Did you poll participants to choose a convenient time and location?
Distractions	Be sure to choose a meeting time and location that is free from distracting sights and sounds. Make sure the seating and the room temperature are comfortable.
Late arrivals	Start the meeting on time. If you don't start the meeting on time, you're penalizing the people who were on time and rewarding the latecomers.
Socializing	Get down to business at hand and follow the agenda. Do not try to talk over the people talking on the side, but be silent until the disruption ceases.
Wandering from agenda	Make sure discussion sticks to the agenda. Bring back the strays. Use parliamentary procedure.
Meetings run late	Follow the agenda. Table items to be discussed at the next meeting or assign the work to a committee. Interrupt lengthy speakers, if necessary, and ask them to summarize. End the meeting on time.

## **HANDLING A MEETING MONOPOLIZER**

A "monopolizer" is a person who attempts to take charge of a group, monopolizing its discussion and trying to determine its direction. Many cooperatives have a monopolizer or two. Left unchecked, a monopolizer can ruin a committee, split a board, or even destroy a co-op's sense of community.

Handling a monopolizer is a delicate matter because the co-op does not want to arbitrarily silence a member. That would be a violation of the member's right to voice a minority opinion within the democratic organization. The solution for the co-op is twofold:

- Proper use of the majority-rule democratic process.
- Effective meeting management by the meeting facilitator.

Responsibility for ensuring the success of the democratic process falls to the board, which is elected and empowered to run the meetings of the cooperative. Committee chairs have the same power delegated to them from the board.

### **Encourage the Democratic Process**

The democratic process is designed so that organizations can get business done fairly and effectively. This includes preventing one person from taking over the agenda or making decisions without a vote. Anyone in the group can move that time limits be imposed, or that each person gets to make their point succinctly and only once. The group can adopt the process by majority vote. This not only puts clear limits on the monopolizer, but shows him or her that the group has heard enough from them.