

Meeting guidelines

Meetings are for making consensus decisions.

An effective meeting will make good use of its tools: The participants, the agenda, the chair, the minutes... and of course, all meetings should be informed by the consensus decision procedure and Principles of Purpose.

Different meetings (small to large team meetings, Forum, Members Meetings, workshops) require different levels of formality, but the goals are largely the same:

- Making consensus decisions & delegating tasks
- Communicating methods & information
- Keeping members connected to one another and to the business

But meetings cost money, require cover and take away from the main business of running the shop. Therefore, be efficient – starting & finishing on time, correct methods etc. – while still encouraging full active participation from the membership. The aim is to work towards consensus; Yes/No voting is an absolute last resort.

The participants

Good conduct improves efficiency, consensus, and moods by making it run smoothly. E.g.:

- Ensure a good physical setting – light, temperature, chairs in a circle.
- Attend on time, be prepared, read the agenda in advance.
- Try to ask ‘information’ questions before a meeting – especially a large one.
- Speak ‘through’ and address comments to the chair, no 2-way conversations.
- Prioritise and match the magnitude of the issue with the size of the meeting.
- Listen properly, give supportive comments/response to encourage speaking.
- Silence is okay, it gives us time to gather thoughts ...and think before speaking!
- Raise hands. Add something new, or ‘second’, try not to repeat or ramble.
- Remember your responsibility for helping the team work towards a decision.
- Above all, be assertive - confident, polite, positive, objective.

The agenda

Agendas give an idea of what is going to be discussed in advance. It helps people to arrive prepared, having had time to think and ask questions, and be ready to make a decision or express their point of view. See Agenda template appendix and try to:

- Make it accessible so all members can contribute; clear deadline for additions.
- Consider where and when to post the agenda – consistently! - in advance.
- Include the date/time of meeting.
- Write agenda items in a clear, concise manner; include name of relevant person.
- Keep the agenda to a reasonable length for the time limit of the meeting.
- Update the agenda after the meeting and make it available for additions.

The chair

Chairing ideally rotates at intervals, but not so frequently as to lose continuity. The chair should be prepared in advance for his/her duties, and have the agenda and last meeting minutes (or forum report) on hand in order to effectively run the meeting. Also:

- Ensure all items on the agenda are discussed or decided on.
- Keep time, prioritise agenda items, suggest when to carry an item forward if the discussion is going round and round.
- Ensure people speak in turn and on topic. No digression as time is precious!

- Ensure no one dominates, calling first on those who haven't spoken much.
- Clarify issues and positions of various parties before seeking agreement.
- **Help discussion to reach consensus.**
- Summarise what has been decided, ensure agreement.
- Allocate tasks; ensure actions are clear, recorded and named.
- Express opinion only after others, try to be less opinionated.

The minutes

Again, the minute-taker ideally rotates (but not too frequently) and is prepared in advance. A copy of the agenda and last meeting minutes (or forum report) on hand will help the minute-taker to support the chair. Good minutes serve as a legal record, a communication tool for good decision making, and prompt to ensure actions are done and decisions are implemented. Minutes should:

- Include the full date, time the meeting starts and ends, list of those present.
- Not say verbatim everything that happens but primarily...
- **Clearly record any Actions, Information or Decisions.**
- Provide a named individual and date/timeline for all actions.
- Be distributed to all participants and approved at the following meeting.
- Be approved and signed at the next meeting to create a trustworthy record.

The difference between a good and bad meeting is mainly process, not content. The tips above should help improve the process.

What makes a bad meeting?

- Lack of preparation
- Low attendance
- Few decisions, much carried forward
- Non participation by majority, no sense of consensus
- Too much talking by a few
- Lots of repetition in discussion
- Dragged on or rushed
- Huge agenda
- Bad physical setting

What makes a good meeting?

- Participation: Lots of it, in different ways (small and big groups, verbal/written)
- Sense of consensus, collective direction (even if not immensely productive in terms of actions and decisions reached)
- Not rushed, short and focused agenda, finished naturally
- Many decisions and specific actions reached
- Responsibilities named and target dates set