

Meeting Guidelines

People attending meetings have different levels of confidence, previous experience of meetings, communication skills, patience, knowledge and understanding, and this will affect their ability to contribute to discussions. There also exist structures of hierarchy in society, operating through gender, class, race etc. that we need to be aware of and to counter. The following roles, techniques and hand signals are designed to facilitate an open and effective exchange of ideas that are not biased by individual abilities or characteristics.

Roles

The following roles are essential for the smooth running of the meetings. They are rotated between all members of the group that are willing to do them. This ensures we all share the work evenly, get a fair share of the benefits from facilitating, taking minutes etc. and most importantly it prevents any individual from wielding power over the others by virtue of always having a more empowering role. The three roles are:

1. **The Facilitator**
2. **The Minute Taker**
3. **The Time Keeper**

1. The Facilitator

= The facilitator oversees the general running of the meeting.

Having a facilitator allows all other members of the group to focus clearly on the topics being discussed, ensures meetings are orderly and keep to time, and assures previous agenda items are revisited if necessary.

The facilitator will:

- A. Prepare an agenda with rough timings for each item.
- B. Facilitate the general smooth running of the meeting keeping roughly to the estimated times.
- C. Facilitate discussion using the various techniques outlined later.

A. Prepare the agenda

- Look through the minutes from the last meeting to see if there are any postponed or ongoing items that need to be on the agenda, any delegated action points to be checked up on.
- Put the items in a good order, usually the most important ones first. If you have access to a board, it's good to write down the agenda so everyone can follow it in the meeting.
- Estimate how long each agenda item will take, decide when to have the break and write down the times (e.g. intros 6:30, discussion 6:35, break 7:30).
- Prepare a rough form that the discussion will take with suggestions on when to do a round or beehive (see Techniques section) and whether to split up into smaller groups.
- Prepare some discussion points to be used if the discussion runs dry or gets repetitive at some point.

NB: The better the meeting is prepared the better it usually goes.

B. Facilitate the meeting

- Briefly introduce each section of the meeting, being more explicit if new people are present.
- If more than one person wishes to speak during any section of the meeting the facilitator will note down who raises their hand, in what order, and indicate whose turn it is to speak next.
- Each agenda item will be summed up by the facilitator to check that everyone is in agreement about what has been said/decided. This also helps the minute taker to make clear notes.
- More generally the facilitator monitors all the factors which affect the general atmosphere of the meeting. For example the facilitator should try to ensure:
 - Comfortable levels of heat, personal space, fresh air, light, nice snack snacks and not too many distracting noises in the room.
 - People are not too tired/lethargic – if so play a silly game, stretch legs, etc.
 - People are not being excluded due to the seating arrangements, language being used, using too many in-jokes etc.

C. Facilitate the discussion

- The discussion begins with the facilitator explaining their idea for a structure to the discussion, usually beginning with a general round on the text or discussion of difficult words or phrases.
- During the discussion the facilitator will be thinking about how much different people have contributed and the range and depth of subjects covered. If necessary they can ask a direct question to someone, suggest a change of subject or suggest a change of activity (like splitting into groups or pairs) in order to keep everyone engaged. The possible change in format is then discussed by everyone else and is never imposed by the facilitator – just suggested.

- The facilitator could also conclude each part of the discussion by summing up what's been said so it can be minuted before moving on to another point.
- The discussion is summed up at the end and the group will usually then have a break.

2. The Minute taker

= The minute taker writes the minutes of the meeting.

Having a minute taker means we are able to keep track of what has been discussed and decided in previous meetings and therefore ensures a certain continuity between meetings. The minutes allow the group to check up on any action points from previous meetings and will help with any history of the group that is ever written. The minutes also give any new members a flavour of what goes on in the group.

The minute taker will...

- A. Note down certain important facts (who's present, date etc.).
- B. Work with the group to summarise the discussion of the text and its conclusions.
- C. Work with the group to summarise other matters discussed and list all action points, including who is to do them, by when etc.

A. The following facts will be noted down each week:

- The full date and time of the meeting
- Names of all who are present at the meeting
- Who is facilitating and who is the minute taker
- The items on the agenda (optional)

B. Minuting the discussion

Because people have different preferences this can be done in two basic ways.

- **Take minutes as you go along.** The minute taker makes rough notes of the main points people make as the discussion takes place. They might need to ask for clarification of a certain point that someone has made. An advantage of this is that it forces people to be able to concisely state the points they are making for the minutes. However, interruptions could spoil the flow of discussion and the minute taker will not be able to participate fully in the discussion.
- **Take minutes at the end.** The minute taker participates as an equal member of the discussion and makes no notes at all. At the end of the discussion everyone tries to remember the main points discussed and the minute taker notes them all down. An advantage of this is that the minute taker is not focussing on lots of things at once, just the discussion. However, some points will probably be forgotten along the way and it

takes more discipline from the whole group to remember to do the minutes at the end and wait whilst the minute taker writes them all down.

C. Minuting the general meeting

- Each agenda item will be noted down and the main points discussed will be summarised.
- The conclusion of the agenda item is also noted. This could be agreement amongst the group about some policy or ideal, an action that needs to be done or a postponed discussion point due to time constraints or disensus.
- Action points need to be written up clearly with what is to be done, by who, by what date. The action points should also be highlighted in the minutes, making them easy to refer back to. This allows the group to check that actions have been carried out.
- Whatever points are postponed should be clearly listed at the very end of the minutes so they can be added to next week's agenda.
- The minutes should also include any other useful information that is mentioned during the meeting such as times and dates of events, recommended reading, useful websites etc.

3. The Time Keeper

= Keeps track of the time

The time keeper keeps track of the time by referring to estimated times on the agenda and (if felt necessary) alerts the group of how long is left to discuss each point. This role is probably only necessary if the group is consistently finding it hard to stick to times and meetings are dragging on.

Techniques

Outlined below are various techniques that can be used to help engage all members of the group in the discussion. The decision of when to use a certain technique is made by the whole group but will generally be suggested by the facilitator.

The Round:

Each person in turn speaks for a minute or two without interruption.

This is a very effective way of giving everyone an equal chance to contribute.

- In a round people take it turns to give their own opinion on some question or subject.
- No interruptions are allowed, apart from questions to clarify what the speaker means. This might require active facilitation.
- Because people don't respond to each other's contributions it can feel a bit weird and fragmented but it gives the group plenty to think about when discussion resumes, and vitally it ensures everyone has a chance to contribute.
- The round needs to have a clear focus which could be a statement or question, or a decision that the group needs to make about some agenda item. If this is the case make sure everyone knows whether they are giving a final vote or just an opinion on the decision to be made.

The Beehive:

People split into pairs to briefly discuss an idea.

This is a good way to get the most shy members of the group to share their thoughts.

- The Beehive is so-called because you will hear a "buzz" in the room as lots of people are speaking at once.
- Whoever suggested the beehive will also have suggested a question/statement to be discussed and people then have a few minutes to chat about it in pairs.
- A Beehive is a good way to wake people up if they seem to be getting distracted or tired.
- People might not have thought about certain ideas before and bouncing ideas of one other person is a lot less intimidating than risking saying something silly in front of the whole group.
- The beehive will also give people more confidence to share their ideas in bigger groups so more people can benefit from their insights.

Small groups:

Split the main group into 2 or more smaller groups.

This creates a more relaxed environment in which more people will contribute.

- When the group is quite large, say 7 or more, it might be useful to split into two groups for some time.
- The two (or more) groups could discuss the same question/problem or could focus on different ones.
- The group needs to decide beforehand whether each small group will present their findings back to the big group at the end and if so how to do that (speech, diagrams, role play, etc.)
- Each small group may want to appoint a minute taker to help with presentations and maybe a facilitator will also be needed.

- Smaller groups allow people to speak more often and make it easier for people to contribute as smaller groups are more relaxed than big ones.
- They also allow a wider range of subjects to be discussed because one group could discuss one thing while another discusses something else.
- One disadvantage is that not everyone gets to hear everyone else's contributions.

Speaker list:

A prioritised list of who will speak next based on frequency of contributions.

This ensures a more equal balance of contributions by specifically prioritising those that speak the least.

- As people indicate they want to speak (using the hand signals) the facilitator writes down their names in a list based on who indicates the desire to contribute first.
- However, when a person who rarely speaks indicates they want to speak the facilitator puts their name to the top of the speaker list, so they will be next to speak.

Hand Signals

Hand signals allow the members of the group to communicate in basic ways without speaking over the top of each other. The following are some suggestions for ways in which hand signals could be used to help the meeting run smoothly.

Raise one hand: Indicates a new point of discussion.

This is the most basic signal and is generally used when there are more than four people in the group or when lots of people want to talk at once. The order of contributions is determined by the order in which people raise their hand and is organised by the facilitator indicating who is next to speak. When you are used to it this feels natural and often people start using it even at the pub.

Raise two fingers: Indicates a direct response to what is being said.

The facilitator prioritises these direct responses above the raised hand responses so that a particular line of argument can be followed in a logical way. Using this signal makes the discussion more coherent and less fragmented.

Hands make a "T": Indicates a time out.

If a “time out” is raised the facilitator might actually interrupt the person speaking as the point to be made is something highly relevant which might invalidate the rest of what the person was going to say. For example, someone might state some fact which they are going to base their argument on but someone else knows it to be false. It is helpful for everyone if the “T” sign is made and the person is allowed to interrupt to tell everyone that they know the fact to be false. A simple example might be to tell everyone that “there is no need to discuss whether we should meet in the library or not because it is closed on Sundays”. The “time out” might also be used if someone doesn’t understand a word or concept and it can then be explained by other group members.

Shaking your hands: Indicates agreement with the last thing said.

- This hand signal gives everyone an instant idea of how many people are in agreement with what is being said.
 - It is particularly useful when making decisions as it is a good way of judging how much consensus exists about a certain point before formally voting.
 - A major disadvantage is that it can reinforce power structures within the group, where certain people get a lot of agreeing shaking while others get very little and it affects people’s confidence.
 - It could also be perceived that a decision has already been made if an idea gets a lot of waves, which might suppress further discussion and other views.
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General Points

Below are a few other suggestions of how to ensure meetings are inclusive, efficient and prevent hierarchies from evolving.

1) Sit in a circle - This is the best way to guarantee that everyone can see each other. It means that the hand signals can be seen by everyone and that people can communicate clearly.

2) Levels of knowledge/understanding

- We are aware that people can easily be excluded by the level of knowledge/understanding assumed by some members of the group.
- Spoken and written language used should be straightforward and people should feel confident to interrupt if they don’t understand some concept, phrase or word.

- Having lectures where someone talks on a subject for the whole group will help keep the level of shared knowledge roughly equal, although it is never possible to equalise this to a large extent.

3) Be flexible with the agenda – Stick to the planned items but always be willing to introduce new ones, change the order, change the times taken or postpone an item wherever the group deems it desirable.

4) Evaluations – Once every six months or so it is worth having an evaluation meeting in which the group discusses the direction of group, plans for the future, evaluates the diversity, inclusivity and efficiency of the meetings and suggests possible changes.

5) Non-meeting activities – Regularly having an informal activity to do as a group is a brilliant way to build friendships, confidence, trust, respect etc. Going to the pub after meetings is one easy way of doing this, but other activities such as eating together, playing sport or making a banner can be even more beneficial sometimes.

Appendix 1: Basic Agenda

- Introductions round (if new people)
- Presentation/decision of the roles – “I’m the facilitator today”
- Presentation of the agenda and time schedule - break and finish time (the agenda could be presented after the discussion in more detail)
- Discussion
- Round on general points on the text and subjects for discussion and questions
- Open discussion; subjects/questions that came up during the round can be addressed one at a time
- Finishing round on what people thought about this discussion/subject
- Conclusion/s of the discussion
- Break
- Presentation of the agenda and more points
- Mention any pertinent points from the previous meeting
- Check up on delegated tasks
- Agenda item 1
- Agenda item 2
- ...
- Last agenda item
- Conclusions
- Till next meeting; what to be done, what to do at that meeting, what to read
- Next meetings facilitator and minute taker