

How To Have Effective Meetings (82)

When setting up and running your route, there is always pressure to get things done; but before stakeholders can act or tasks can be delegated, you need to discuss ideas and plan together. Meetings are often an essential way of doing this, whether they are with members of the route or broader stakeholder groups such as municipalities and donors.

So make sure that your meetings are efficient, so that they help the route to get things done and achieve its goals. This Guide will help you do this.

The way that your route schedules and runs its meetings should be just another way of expressing your aims and values. So your meetings should be professional, punctual, inclusive and useful – a place where people can express creativity, have their voice heard and be inspired, while also focusing on action towards the development of the route.

This is all part of good governance, and what is said at these meetings is an important part of running a route, so make sure minutes are always kept in writing.

This Guide takes a broader look at meetings, and explains what you can do to make every meeting more organised, more creative and more productive.

Also look at the Guides on How to Use the Founding Documents for Effective Functioning and How to Report to and Involve Members in Governance.

Why are effective meetings

important?

Meetings often fail in two critical ways: they may not always allow ideas to be shared and discussed properly, and they may not always end with specific tasks being given to specific people. The first problem can lead to members getting frustrated, so they may stop contributing or even attending. The second problem can lead to things not getting done, which is also demoralising for everyone involved.

Effective meetings are vital because people really do need to sit together, talk, make plans and co-ordinate what they do. Without this, there can easily be chaos as everyone 'does their own thing' without considering others. Organisations like our routes are built on co-operation, and good meetings can be the beginning of fruitful co-operation.

What makes a meeting effective?

- There must be a clear reason for the meeting – a decision that must be taken or definite topics for discussion. Everyone attending must be clear about what the purpose and focus is.
- Every good meeting needs some structure; without it, you could end up having a 'chat session' that does not lead anywhere. Ensure that there is an agenda with clear headings for everyone to follow – even if you have a general heading/session for other topics to be raised.
- Decisions and conclusions need to be written down in minutes – or 'minuted'. This is part of the overall governance of your route – you must be able to come back to the decisions that were taken, and so they need to be in writing.
- Minutes must be circulated to everyone who present, so that they can check that the contents are an accurate reflection of what took place. Then they should be carefully filed where they can be easily retrieved.

- It is vital to set specific tasks for specific people. For instance, the meeting decides that the main street of your town must from now on be kept spotlessly clean, then the meeting must decide: Who will ensure that the street is kept clean? How should it be cleaned? What will be done if the street is not cleaned?

When to call a meeting and when not to

The problem with meetings, even useful ones, is that they do time, so think carefully before calling everyone together. Ask:

- Is this meeting really necessary?
- Could I solve the problem by speaking to one person?
- Could I just send an e-mail to those concerned?
- Do we need to discuss all the items on the agenda?

Remember too that if you need a really quick decision on something, a meeting may not be the right way to go about it. Meetings should be held so that people can discuss issues and argue things out. It's fairly pointless. In fact, it can cause long-term problems if you call a meeting and try to rush through an important issue. If you do call an urgent meeting, and find there is more to be discussed than you had thought, rather delay your decision, allow everyone to do more homework, and call another meeting later.

Take an example: Your route needs to get involved in a government tourism initiative that you have just heard about. You think you have a pretty good idea of how this can be done, so you call an urgent meeting of members to make a decision so you can respond to this government department. However, only three or four members out of 20 can make it to the meeting, and they each have a very different view of what is needed. More research is clearly required and the issue needs to be discussed in greater detail. It makes sense therefore to delay the decision by a day or two in order to make the right

choice.

Always ask: what is best for the route? You cannot go far wrong if you take this approach.

You've decided to call a meeting. Now what?

First, ensure that only the relevant people are invited to the meeting. If a person cannot contribute to the meeting or is not directly involved with the issue, they don't have to be there. Officials are sometimes invited out of courtesy. Avoid this if possible. These people can read the minutes afterwards should they wish to.

Second, ensure that the people at the meeting are empowered to take decisions. For instance, if you have arranged a meeting with an important stakeholder, and you suddenly cannot make the meeting, ensure the person you send is able to take a decision on your behalf; if not, postpone the meeting.

Finally, prepare an agenda (list of items to be discussed) and circulate it to everyone who will be at the meeting. The better prepared people are, the more productive the meeting will be. If there is no time to send out an agenda beforehand, at least have one prepared for the meeting itself, so that there is a clear idea of what will be discussed.

Don't put too many items on the agenda, especially if you are going to discuss complicated or awkward issues. The normal order is:

- Welcome
- Apologies
- Approval and signing of previous minutes
- Matters arising from these minutes
- Brief or urgent items
- Main topic(s) of discussion

- Other business
- Date for the next meeting

Plan how long each of these will take (more or less) so that you can better manage the meeting.

Basic rules of all formal meetings

- Everyone should attend on time, should pay attention, and should take an active part in proceedings.
- An agenda should be agreed upon and followed.
- People should prepare for meetings in advance.
- Everyone must accept the Chairperson's authority.
- All people attending have the right to be heard.
- Decisions should be made clearly and summarised so that everyone knows what is going on.
- Someone should be appointed as the meeting's secretary to minute the main points and decisions reached at the meeting. These minutes should be handed out, e-mailed or posted soon after the meeting, and agreed upon by everyone who attended. The meeting secretary should be a good listener and able to write quickly and clearly.

Chairing a formal meeting

Before you begin the meeting, make sure the meeting room is prepared. Check that there are enough chairs, that there is a copy of the agenda and the previous minutes (if any) at each place at the table, and that there is some water or tea available if the meeting is to last a while.

Opening the meeting

Start the meeting by welcoming everyone, asking for any apologies (people who were invited but have apologised for not being able to attend), and explaining the main purpose of getting together. After this, check that everyone agrees that the previous minutes accurately record what took place at that

meeting. If all agree, ask: "May I sign these minutes as being correct?" or words to this effect, and then sign the minutes in front of everyone.

Agenda

Run through this quickly so that everyone knows what is to be discussed. Be open to suggestions: someone might propose dropping an item or adding one under 'Other business'.

Start the discussion

A good way to do this is to ask questions. This is especially helpful if some people are hesitant to contribute. Once discussion is under way, you will then have to manage this so that everyone can contribute and yet no single person is allowed to dominate. This can be challenging!

One of the most important rules in chairing a meeting is that all discussion must be conducted through you. In other words, people should not address each other directly, but say, for example: "Mr Chairman, I think that John is wrong on this last point. I believe that we should rather do the following..." This is a useful way of keeping order and also helps the discussion from becoming too personal, which can be a problem if the debate is tense and difficult.

Listen carefully to what everyone says, and be sensitive to what is going on. If you can see that someone wants to make a point, but is a bit shy, ask directly: "Did you want to say something?"

Do not allow any one person to go on for too long. Stop the person by thanking them and bringing other people into the discussion. You are the chairperson, and this is your meeting; no one else has the right to 'take over' and force an opinion on everybody else. At the same time, beware that you do not dominate the meeting; it can be tempting as the boss to simply

push issues through, regardless of what anyone says. Give people a chance to have their say.

If people start to talk between themselves, stop them immediately. 'Mini-meetings' are disturbing, disrespectful and undermine your position as Chairperson. For the same reasons, cellphones (including yours) should be switched off and there should be no laptops on the table, unless they are being used as part of a presentation.

It is helpful to smile, have a sense of humour and keep a light touch as Chairperson. Even if the meeting is formal and deals with serious issues, there is no reason why it cannot be held in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere.

Summarise

Summarise the main points of discussion from time to time, especially if the debate becomes a bit muddled. You might say something like: "I'm hearing two suggestions here. Jack is saying we should buy new equipment and pay for it in instalments, and Joe is saying we should buy it and pay cash. But it seems that you both support the idea of buying new equipment." Remember that people may be confused, yet may feel awkward about saying so in case they appear stupid.

Discipline

Ensure that the discussion sticks to the items on the agenda, and watch the clock. If a debate is taking longer than expected but is useful, it is almost always better to postpone this discussion to another meeting in order to carry on with the agenda.

Reach decisions

As the Chairperson, you need to guide the meeting towards making decisions. This means you have to listen carefully to

the various arguments, sum up the key points, ensure that consensus has been reached, and announce the meeting's decision. For instance, you might say: "It seems we are agreed that the reception area should be redecorated. Can we make the decision to do so?" You'll be able to see from everyone's reaction what the answer is, and this can be recorded as a decision.

If there are several people who disagree strongly, you might have to take the final decision. Or you might choose to take a vote.

Close

At the end, set a suitable time and date for the next meeting and thank everyone for attending.

Minutes

As noted, it is a good idea to appoint someone who listens and writes well to be the meeting's secretary. Avoid, if possible, being the secretary yourself; it is difficult to write while managing the meeting.

The secretary should write down the names of everyone present.

It is not necessary to write down every detail in the discussion, simply the main points. For instance: "After much debate on the high costs of buying a new printer and the company's cash flow problems, it was decided to buy a new printer on instalments. Jack Khumalo to find best printer deal."

Avoid, if possible, giving jobs to people who are not at the meeting. They might resent not being asked first, or they simply might not be able to do them.

The meeting secretary should give you the minutes to check after the meeting.

Who is involved with holding meetings

Key people in the route (the Route Forum, the route participants, the municipality's local economic development manager, etc.) are all going to be involved in the planning and implementation of initiatives, so they will all need to be regularly involved in the route's meetings. But it is really the Secretary's job to do the administration behind the scenes: helping to set suitable dates for meetings, helping the Chairperson to set the agenda, sending out invitations and reminders, securing a suitable venue, arranging refreshments if necessary, taking minutes, distributing minutes, etc. This is a vital role, since people need constant following up to ensure they are playing their roles.

What meetings the route needs to hold

The constitution of the route's membership body – whether it's a voluntary association, a nonprofit company or a co-operative – will usually require at least an AGM and a regular meeting of key stakeholders (perhaps once a quarter or once a month). The AGM is important for reporting back to members, appointing new committee members, and getting a mandate for the following year; it is also important for compliance purposes, since the route's financial report needs to be presented and passed by the members so that the annual financial statement can be submitted to the SA Revenue Services. (See Guide: [How to Remain Complaint with the Law.](#))

Practical tips

- Circulate an agenda before every meeting; this is a simple courtesy but is also strategically essential.

People must know what to prepare for and must know what the meeting is supposed to achieve.

- Ensure you involve the right people in your meetings; for example, if there are event details to discuss that only involve a few people on a committee, then let them meet separately or form a subcommittee for those discussions.
- Emphasise punctuality as a habit for all committee members. This saves the time taken by meetings and reinforces the principle of basic organisation and respect for fellow members (their time is as precious). If a person is regularly late for meetings, they have a time management problem – and this problem will also be undermining the way they work in their own businesses.
- Try not to have more meetings than you absolutely have to; members must feel that every meeting is important, or they will not commit to attending regularly.
- Do not close a meeting without a clear plan of who will do what and by when. This is the only way that meetings will lead to action.
- Hold people to account for what they promised or were requested to do at the previous meeting. If there is no accountability, people will lose faith in the group's ability to get things done.
- Keep the meeting focused on the agenda topics. People may often want to talk about unrelated issues, so acknowledge those and make a note for a future discussion, but ensure that the focus returns to what the meeting was planned for.

Use of this Guide

Everybody involved in the route – especially those who have not been involved in leadership or management roles – need some introduction to how the route will be administered and how decisions will be taken. Part of this induction process can include a section on how meetings will be run, and how to

make these meetings effective.

If possible, it would be very useful to arrange a special training workshop on how to run an effective meeting. There are training organisations that offer this kind of course (see your town's local business directory or visit websites such as www.skillsportal.co.za), or you could get one of your more experienced members to conduct a short session.

Other Resources

Here are some other helpful Guides and Resources:

- Guide: [How To Serve As Route Chairperson](#)
- Guide: [How To Lead Your Route](#)
- Video: [How To Chair A Meeting](#)
- Guide: [How To Elect Your Route Leadership And Appoint Them To The Best Positions](#)
- Guide: [How To Compile Your Annual Route Plan](#)