

How to Have a Good Meeting

One of the roles of sustainability professionals is to coordinate and facilitate meetings. Often they function as the leader. The person who organizes or chairs a meeting can be called a leader, a chair, or a convener (also spelled convenor). The leader manages the meeting process, which includes scheduling the meeting, locating a room, notifying participants, preparing the agenda, managing the meeting itself, and following up on action items after the meeting. Some groups elect to rotate the task of leading meetings.

In some situations, particularly those with complex or controversial issues to address, the group may use a facilitator in addition to the leader. A facilitator is a neutral third party, typically an individual trained in effective group facilitation methods, whose task is to guide the group process. While the leader deals with the content of the meeting, the facilitator deals with the process. A facilitator is particularly helpful at times of transformation and change, and can help a group use conflict constructively in order to maximize its collective wisdom and to produce positive outcomes with everyone's participation.

Some meetings are convened for specific purposes and others are scheduled to occur regularly, such as once a day, once a week, or twice a month. Meetings are used for the kind of work which requires people to interact; they should not be held just for the sake of meeting. Before planning a meeting, the first step is to define the objectives of the meeting and determine what the meeting is intended to achieve. If it is not possible to state the objectives of the meeting in a single sentence, a meeting is probably not needed. If no clear objectives are identified and a meeting is not needed, it should be canceled.

One of the best—and funniest—explanations of this principle is still the 1976 management training video “Meetings, Bloody Meetings,” produced by John Cleese, co-creator of the British comedy troupe Monty Python. In this popular video, remade in 1993 and still used in business training, Cleese portrays an inefficient meeting convener who dreams he is brought before a judge for negligent conduct of meetings. After reviewing his past few meetings, the judge pronounces the offender guilty on all five counts: failing to plan the meeting in advance, failing to inform attendees, failing to plan a detailed agenda, failing to control the discussion, and failing to summarize and record the decisions.

A meeting is more than a single event. It is part of a system. Thus, preparation before the meeting and follow-up after the meeting are as important as work done during the meeting itself.

The most important meeting management tool is an agenda. “Agenda” is a Latin word which means literally “the things to be done.” An agenda is a list of meeting topics. The topics are developed by first defining the goals for the meeting. If an overall project goal is large, then it should be divided into a series of smaller meeting goals. The group can make progress incrementally by achieving two or three of these meeting goals each time they come together. The agenda should be sent to participants several days in advance, and they should be invited to suggest additions or refinements.

A good agenda lists topics in a logical order, spelling out what will be discussed, the goal for each discussion, who will be presenting or discussing, and the time allotted for each. Three to six agenda items is a manageable number. It is recommended that an agenda begin with a brief topic to bring people together, such as a check-in or an overview. Agenda items should be framed in positive terms and presented as opportunities rather than as problems. Agenda items which are stated in negative terms can imply that a solution may not exist and so can impact a group’s ability to solve problems effectively. For example, if a group is considering a climate action plan, rather than asking, “Will we be able to meet our greenhouse gas emissions goal?” the group might instead ask, “What can we do to meet this goal?”

Some meeting leaders ask one person to volunteer as a timekeeper, particularly in large or complex meetings. The timekeeper watches the agenda, letting the leader know when half the time has elapsed for each agenda item and again when 2 minutes remain.

The agenda allows members to work in a logical order and to finish one topic before moving on to the next. The meeting should be brought to a close (1) when all the agenda items have been covered, (2) when the group has gone as far as it can without gathering additional information, whether or not all of the scheduled time has been used, or (3) when the time scheduled for the meeting has elapsed. Meetings should not last beyond their scheduled time unless everyone agrees to continue. A meeting should end on a positive note, which could include a summary of what was accomplished and a summary of the next steps.

Many meeting leaders write on flipcharts, large pads of paper either supported on an easel or made of self-sticking sheets which can be peeled off and stuck to walls to help participants view and discuss the ideas generated as they work. Some meetings use equivalent electronic versions, which avoid the use of paper and are more universally accessible for people of all abilities. These tools extend the group's working short-term memory, freeing members to keep thinking and to participate more fully.

Some conveners label one flipchart sheet the "Parking Lot" and post it off to the side of the room. Ideas which come up and which are not on the agenda can be recorded here, so that they are not forgotten and can be dealt with at a later time, but do not interrupt the main agenda topics of the meeting. Ideas can either be written directly on the parking lot using markers, or they can be written on sticky notes and then affixed to the parking lot.

Graphic recording is a method of laying out an agenda or capturing a group's ideas in a nonlinear format using words, pictures, symbols, and color on flipcharts or other media. Graphic meeting facilitation emerged in the 1970s through the work of graphic designer David Sibbet. A number of books and organizations now offer training in the graphic method of taking notes and thinking with pictures. Several approaches appear under various names, including idea mapping, concept mapping, mind maps, graphic recording, and graphic facilitation.

Minutes are a written record of a meeting. They serve as the group's memory, mapping its progress and making it possible to build on previous ideas and decisions. Minutes minimize confusion because everyone has the same set of notes.

In most meetings, one person is designated as the recorder at the beginning of the meeting. While in some organizations a paid staff member serves as recorder, in some groups members take turns serving as recorder. Some leaders use strategies such as designating the fourth person to arrive at the meeting space as the recorder as a way of encouraging participants to arrive early. The recorder can use the agenda to make notes, recording decisions made or actions agreed next to each agenda item; they can then use these notes to compile the minutes.

The minutes summarize what was discussed, record what was decided, and list action items together with who agreed to take action, what they agreed to do, and by when. The format of the minutes is not important as long as they record actions taken, decisions made, and responsibility for actions following the meeting. Recorders should provide an objective report of what happened and should avoid inserting subjective judgments, such as “good idea” or “heated debate.” Most minutes do not require the level of detail used for legal proceedings; it is not necessary to record the exact words of a discussion or the name of the person raising an issue. On the other hand, when the group is agreeing to specific language, then recording the precise wording is essential. The minutes should be sent to participants within several days, while the meeting process is still fresh in people’s minds, so that they can spot any corrections or clarifications that might be needed. In some meetings, one item on the agenda is the approval of the minutes from the previous meeting.

Group Process Techniques

Having an agenda does not guarantee that a meeting will be productive. Each topic on the agenda must have a process. The leader or facilitator needs to consider how ideas will be generated, how ideas will be evaluated, and how decisions will be made. They need to consider how conflict will be managed and how participants will be encouraged to focus, to face issues directly, and to communicate honestly and openly on difficult subjects. They need to decide not only what the group will discuss, but how they will discuss it.

To help promote positive interactions and in anticipation of normal differences of opinion that could lead to conflict, some groups establish ground rules about civil meeting conduct when they are first formed. The meeting ground rules describe appropriate behavior and may include focusing on issues not individuals, listening respectfully, no name calling or accusatory statements, and so forth.

Group processes are not a way to eliminate conflict; they are a way to manage conflict. Differences of opinion and even conflict are a natural part of working together, and an absence of conflict usually means that a diversity of viewpoints has been excluded from the decision-making process. Conflict can be seen as a resource, a positive force for information exchange, learning, and dynamic change. Disagreement helps to broaden and enrich the range of options available within a group. Humans, as members of a species which depends upon social interaction, instinctively try to reduce conflicts as quickly as they can. A skilled facilitator can help a group instead work through these conflicts, make them visible, and use them to result in a stronger, more productive group which generates better solutions.

Two broad types of activity are accomplished using group processes: generating ideas and evaluating ideas. Leaders and participants need to be clear that these are two different activities. Once ideas have been generated and evaluated, then decisions can be made using approaches such as majority voting or consensus.

Generating Ideas

Brainstorming is a group process for generating ideas. Effective brainstorming has a specific set of ground rules that are different from general meeting protocol. A brainstorming session should begin with the facilitator or leader reminding the group about these unique ground rules:

1. No evaluation of ideas, positive or negative, is permitted.
2. The primary goal is to generate a large quantity of ideas; the more, the better.
3. Wild ideas are encouraged; the wackier, the better.
4. Hitchhiking, or building on previously offered ideas, is encouraged.

Research has shown that the first 15 or 20 ideas generated are usually already known or tried, and the truly creative ideas only appear once the obvious ideas have been offered. Truly wild ideas may not themselves become the solution, but many times they spark a related idea and spur a group to find a connection which does become the solution. Brainstorming works well with participants who do not normally interact with each other. In fact, the more diverse the group, the better.

Some steps in problem-solving are best approached through independent thinking. Other steps benefit from the synergy that occurs during social interaction and the free exchange of ideas. Effective meetings provide room for both. For example, a process known as Nominal Group Process or Nominal Group Technique is a process for generating and evaluating ideas which defines when people should be working individually and when they should work as a group.

In the Nominal Group Process, each participant silently and anonymously writes as many ideas as they can about a particular issue, writing one idea per sticky note or index card. During this period people are able to organize their thoughts without influence from others, and less assertive members have equal input to more vocal members. After 5 or 10 minutes the ideas are shared without discussion or evaluation. The facilitator may go around the room, asking each person in turn to read one idea, recording each idea on a flipchart and repeating until all ideas have been recorded. (The practice of going around a room one person at a time, usually in a circle, is known in meeting management as “round-robin.”) Or, to preserve anonymity, the facilitator may collect the cards, then post each, one at a time. Once all the ideas have been posted, members discuss the ideas, one at a time. They then take a preliminary vote on the relative importance or priority of each idea. In some groups this is done anonymously, with members ranking each idea on a scale of 1 to 5. The group discusses the vote, possibly votes again, discusses again, and then conducts a final vote.

Several variations of Nominal Group Process are used in meetings. In the process known as Gallery or Gallery Walk, sometimes also referred to as Museum Tour, people are seated at small tables in clusters of four to eight. Each table is given a flipchart and easel or self-stick flipchart sheets, on which they write, draw, or diagram as many ideas as they can. Or, members may write individual ideas on sticky notes, which they post on flipcharts. After a few minutes, the facilitator asks the groups to rotate clockwise to the next table, where they discuss the ideas at that station. The process is repeated until everyone has toured every station. Participants return to their own tables to make modifications and additions, as idea hitchhiking occurs.

In a variation of Gallery, each subgroup is assigned to explore a different perspective on the topic. Each table generates and displays their ideas, as described above. When the facilitator asks the groups to rotate to the next table, one member of each group remains at their original table to act as an expert. Once group members complete their tours, they can take the place of the members acting as experts, so that every person has an opportunity to see and discuss every chart.

In the process known as Brain Writing, sometimes also called Pin Card or Silent Brainstorm, each person silently writes three ideas on a sticky note or piece of paper. After 1 or 2 minutes, each person passes their ideas to the person on their right. That person adds three new ideas or adds to the ideas already on the sheet. Using sticky notes allows ideas to be connected together and passed in chains. The passing continues for several more rounds as members add ideas and improvements to the original ideas. A participant always has the option to “pass” if they can’t think of anything to add.

A simpler variation of Brain Writing is to have each person contribute just one idea each time and then pass the paper. In this version, the process moves more quickly and doesn’t bog down as people try to think of multiple ideas. This simpler process is helpful toward the end of the Brain Writing, when it becomes more difficult for each person to think of three new ideas.

In the process known as Crawford Slip Writing, each person is given from five to 50 sticky notes or slips of paper. Each person silently writes their ideas, one per sticky note or slip. At the end of 5 or 10 minutes, the sticky notes or slips are collected and the facilitator or another group organizes and evaluates them. The Crawford Slip method is an effective way for large groups to generate and organize ideas.

Evaluating Ideas

Affinity Diagramming is a synthesizing step that can be used to organize and evaluate ideas which have been generated by a group. It can be used following a brainstorming session, or by itself. Some facilitators recommend limiting affinity diagrams to groups of five to 15 people, while others use this process in groups of up to 30 people. Each person is given a large number of sticky notes and a marker, so that the writing is bold and so that everyone's format is similar. To create an affinity diagram, as in Nominal Group Process, participants silently and anonymously generate as many ideas as they can, as fast as possible. Each person writes one idea on each sticky note. At the end of 5 or 10 minutes, members post their notes on a wall or other surface. As an alternative, people may use index cards instead of sticky notes, and arrange them on a table or on a large display board using pushpins.

Now members look for ideas that may be related and begin organizing the notes into related groups. Depending on the group and the subject being worked upon, a facilitator may suggest that one person at a time try categorizing, or they may suggest working as a group. Some facilitators believe that the sorting should be done in silence, and others suggest that members discuss what they are doing. A variation of this process is to determine several grouping categories in advance while also allowing for the emergence of new ones as ideas are evaluated.

It is permissible to move notes multiple times. If an idea keeps moving between two categories, participants may want to make a duplicate of the note and post the idea in more than one category. If a note is moved many times, it can be placed to the side by itself. After groupings seem to be stable, members discuss their thoughts and select a heading for each group. The groupings and their titles should be recorded. A digital camera is a useful tool for preserving a backup record of details in these kinds of processes.

The Affinity Diagram process is sometimes also known as Snow Card or Snowball. Each individual card containing an idea is called a snow card. When the cards are grouped by theme, they produce clusters of cards, or snowballs.

The Delphi method uses multiple rounds of questionnaires to help a group converge toward a common idea. A questionnaire is sent to participants, who send them back to a facilitator by a given date. The facilitator tabulates the responses, then sends the anonymous results along with a new questionnaire to members, asking them to evaluate and rank the responses. Sometimes these questionnaires ask participants also to include written statements about their positions. The surveys are returned again and the facilitator tabulates the ratings and summarizes the arguments anonymously. Another survey is sent, and members revise their responses based on information from other participants. The process continues until consensus is reached or no new information is generated. The Delphi method can also be conducted online, with results compiled by computer.

A weighted criteria chart is a numerical method for evaluating ideas relative to each other in order to reach a decision, usually with the assistance of a facilitator. Because this method analyzes multiple alternatives against multiple selection criteria, it is also known as Multiattribute Decision Analysis. It can be done manually or using specialized decision software. The group generates a list of options it is considering. Participants then develop a list of criteria they will use for evaluating each of the choices. A table can be set up, with one alternative in each column and one criterion in each row. The group assigns a relative weight to each criterion, depending upon how important each one is. Some groups assign a number from 1 to 10, with 10 being the most important and 1 the least important; others assign a number from 1 to 3 or from 1 to 5. Other groups assign a percentage of the total to each by assigning decimal numbers to signify the relative weight, with the total weights adding up to 1. For each alternative, the group assigns a number from 1 to 10 for each criterion, indicating how well that alternative satisfies that criterion. Each number is then multiplied by the weighting factor for that criterion. Finally, the totals are added up for each alternative. The alternative with the highest total score is the preferred alternative. Participants may want to discuss the results, to be sure they make sense.

Making Decisions

As teams work toward decision points, they may want to begin to get a sense of whether there is agreement and whether there are in fact disagreements. A straw poll is an unofficial, nonbinding vote which can be used to help bring potential conflicts out into the open. Straw polls taken more than once as the team works on an issue can help to build consensus.

Multi-voting is an approach that can be used to shorten a long list of items and to set priorities when a group is having difficulty making decisions. In one method, voting is done with peel-off file folder sticker dots. The number of items on the list is counted, and each person is given one-third that many dots. For example, if there are 18 items, each person receives 6 dots. Each participant places a dot on every item they want to be treated as a high priority. Some facilitators say that each person can distribute the votes however they want; others do not allow placing multiple dots on one item. Participants can also be given votes, rather than dots, and voting can be done by a show of hands or by placing tally marks next to items on the list. In another method of multi-voting, each person is given points to distribute, typically 10 or 100 points. Participants write numbers of votes or make tally marks beside items on the list.

Using any of these methods, if the votes appear unanimous, then the top vote-getting items become the high-priority list. If they are not unanimous, then the bottom third to half of the items is eliminated, and another vote is taken. In the second round of voting, each member will have fewer votes to distribute. The voting can be repeated until the desired number of items remains.

Multi-voting is a democratic process which avoids one of the problems inherent in standard majority voting: situations in which there are only two sides. When a majority vote is taken, the result is that some members are winners and some are losers. Multi-voting distributes power equally. And since most participants will see at least one of the items that they voted for near the top of the priority list, the feeling of winners and losers is avoided.

The two basic ways of making a group decision are voting and consensus. Reaching consensus usually involves a lot of listening and exchanging of ideas. The word “consensus” means agreement; it comes from the Latin word *consentire*, “to feel or perceive together.” Consensus is reached after all the participants have had the opportunity to voice their opinions, each person’s concerns have been heard and understood, and the group working together has developed a solution that everyone agrees is the best solution given all the factors. Consensus does not mean that people are in 100 percent agreement. It means that the members of the group have together generated a decision that all of them can live with.

Public Participation

At the community scale, the process of people working together to solve community problems or plan for the community’s future is called public participation or community participation.

Common projects which can involve public participation include city climate plans, regional land use plans, transportation planning, community visioning, and design of public spaces such as parks, street systems, city halls, and schools. Participation means that people work together to define their own objectives and find their own solutions. This process is not a one-way communication from leaders to citizens; it is a collaboration in which everyone who affects or is affected by an issue works together, interacting and influencing one another, learning together, and developing a shared vision. In the process social capital grows and the web of multiple, sometimes divergent interests co-evolve. It is a process of community building. As a manual from the EPA, “How to Consult with and Involve the Public,” says, “The public includes everyone.”

Participation involves stakeholders. A stakeholder is anyone who has a stake in the problem and in the outcomes of the group process, any individual or group who is affected by the problem or by the actions of other stakeholders, or who can affect other stakeholders. There are different kinds of stakeholders and also different kinds of experts. Citizens and users are experts in the places where they live or work, bringing detailed local knowledge that is helpful in identifying problems and evaluating alternatives. Professionals, such as ecologists, architects, or planners, have technical expertise they can contribute to complex problem-solving. Working out the best solutions requires both.

This is not easy work. Democracy is messy. People disagree. Stakeholders come from different backgrounds, from a range of cultures, customs, education, and economic circumstances, and each brings their own needs, wants, beliefs, and ideas, and often they appear to be in conflict. Winston Churchill once remarked, “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.” Participation at the community scale requires courage and commitment, but it may be worth the effort when one considers the alternative scenarios.

When the goal is to collect public input, large meetings entailing presentations, question-and-answer sessions, and public comment are the least effective method. First, people who attend and speak up may not represent community views. In addition, while these sessions may be one way to present information to an audience, they do not provide the opportunity to work together and to find common ground. Small groups and opportunities to talk one-on-one are more productive. Venues for sharing information and collecting input can include open houses, charettes, steering committees, task forces, focus groups, panels and forums, informal contacts, presentations to stakeholder groups, websites, and printed materials.

Different purposes and projects require different levels of participation. For many projects, the results will be more sustainable when people who are affected do not just give input but are part of generating the solution. Social research in public participation has shown that the main source of user satisfaction is not the degree to which a person’s needs have been met, but their feeling of having influenced the decisions.

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) defines several levels of involvement: The first, and least participatory, is to *inform*. The second level is to *consult*, that is, to tell people what is being planned for them and to collect public feedback. Gathering feedback is important, but it is not genuine participation.

A more active level is to *involve* the public, working directly with people and developing alternatives which reflect their goals. An even more participative level is *collaboration*, in which participants work as partners. The most participative approach is to *empower*, with participants making decisions and controlling the outcomes.

Architect Henry Sanoff, in his 1999 book *Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning*, writes, “There is a danger that the entire process turns out to reflect the aphorism that a camel is a horse designed by committee. . . In fact, the camel is an apt metaphor, as it is a unique animal capable of accommodating severe climatic conditions as a result of its unique design.”

Charrettes are a common approach to community participation. These fast-paced, intensive community participatory processes bring together professionals, stakeholders, and anyone who might have an opinion or be affected by the issue. Together they define problems, identify alternatives, and build a shared vision from the beginning.

Community participation includes a need to identify problems and opportunities. One approach to doing this is known as SWOT analysis (pronounced like the word “swat”), which stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Strengths and weaknesses are typically internal elements inherent in an organization, community, or situation. Opportunities and threats are typically current or future external elements in the environment.

A similar approach is known as PARK analysis. The letters stand for Preserve (what we have now that is positive), Add (what we do not have that is positive), Remove (what we have that is negative), and Keep out (what we do not have that is negative). Many of the group process techniques discussed above can be used to identify and organize SWOT or PARK ideas.

Resources

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