



Extension FactSheet

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Planning and Conducting Effective Public Meetings

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Introduction

Local government officials periodically conduct public meetings as part of the process of developing or explaining legislation and regulations. For example, in permitting and re-mediation processes, public meetings are typically required. Another common use of public meetings is to explain new regulations and answer questions about them. And finally, progressive local government officials may voluntarily choose to seek public input in the development of legislation. They have learned that people will more readily accept a government policy, if they had a role in its development.

Unfortunately, in recent years, public meetings have become less and less satisfactory from the point of view of both the public and government officials. In fact, many government officials have resigned to conducting public meetings that degenerate into shouting matches. Such meetings may be counterproductive, ending with factions of the public becoming more hostile toward each other and/or government officials than they were before the meeting. While much of this trend relates to a general decline in civility and civic responsibility among the citizenry, government officials may be able to counteract this trend with proper planning.

One fundamental problem has been that meeting planners and facilitators may not have been clear about the purpose of a public meeting. As mentioned above, a public meeting may be primarily to **inform** the public (provide information about a proposed or enacted government policy), **consult** the public (seek reaction to a proposal), or **involve** the public (use public input as the basis for policy development). When government officials allow the pub-

lic to believe that **involvement** is being sought when they have no such intention, public cynicism is sure to follow.

Another major criticism of public meetings is that they are often not well planned or conducted. Such meetings typically do not have a clearly defined purpose, agenda, or roles for organizers and participants. These meetings are characterized by some of the following behaviors:

- Outspoken people are allowed to dominate the discussion with very little input from the rest of the group,
- Participants are allowed to degrade or insult others at the meeting,
- Participants make accusations against other participants, and
- Participants are not able to stick with the topic at hand.

Planning for Public Meetings

Successful public meetings first and foremost require planning. Meetings not planned well often leave participants feeling frustrated and believing that attending the meeting was a waste of time. Listed below are some ideas for how to prepare for a successful public meeting.

Determine the purpose of the meeting.

One of the first steps in planning a public meeting is to know its purpose. For example, is the meeting intended to inform, consult, or involve the public? Another important point to consider is whether the purpose is best achieved through a public meeting. If it is decided that a public meeting should be held, then the reasons for it must be articulated to the public. The purpose of the meeting should be reiterated at the start of the meeting to set the parameters for those in attendance.

Build relationships with participants in advance.

Another step in planning for public participation involves identifying and involving the key stakeholders. A successful public process will include a diversity of citizens who have a substantial interest in the outcome of that process. Diverse participation also ensures that relevant information about the particular issue is not overlooked. Diverse participation also can help to legitimize the final decisions or actions for the larger public.

One of the first things a meeting organizer can do to effectively include those with an interest in an issue is to cultivate a relationship with key stakeholders in advance of the public meeting. If a rapport is built between the meeting organizer(s) and the likely participants in advance, there is a greater likelihood that the participants will perceive the organizer as a **person** rather than a **role**. Typically, the reaction of the public to the person in charge of a contentious meeting is not a reflection of how the public perceives him or her but is a response to the role the meeting organizer is fulfilling at the time. Hostility to those in leadership roles may result from past frustrations with meeting organizer(s), the sponsoring organization(s), or the particular issue at hand. In summary, relationship building among representative participants and meeting planners may help build trust and confidence that will reduce hostility at the meeting.

Another important outcome of building rapport with potential participants in advance is the ability to propose **ground rules** for how the meeting will be conducted. At the onset of any potentially contentious meeting, ground rules should be agreed upon. They should also be revised periodically throughout the meeting as needed. Some suggestions for ground rules include:

- Avoid talking while others are speaking,
- Avoid personal attacks or accusations, and
- Respect agreements about time.

Have a draft agenda.

Before any meeting takes place, a **draft** agenda should be developed. This agenda should be presented to the participants prior to the meeting or at its beginning. The participants should revise it at the beginning, if deemed necessary. This agenda is very important because it serves as a guide for the facilitator to keep the group moving toward accomplishing their goals. In preparing the draft agenda, the convener or facilitator of the meeting should focus on what, how, who, and when. The what of a meeting includes the issues to be discussed, the how includes the means or process through which the issues will be addressed, the who is the participant responsible for presenting or discussing the agenda item, and the when is where the issue or item is on the agenda and amount of time each item will be allotted.

Consider the meeting space.

While often overlooked as unimportant to the success of a meeting, the **meeting space** should be selected wisely. Meeting planners should identify an **appropriate location** and room arrangement. For example, if participants are uncomfortable, they are less likely to concentrate on the tasks at hand. The arrangement most often recommended is either a semicircle or a U-shape because it allows participants to be face-to-face and their attention can also be directed to the area where flipcharts are being utilized to record the meeting. In potentially contentious situations, participants should perceive the meeting space as neutral territory.

Have a follow-up plan.

Another aspect of the planning process is to have a strategy identified for **following-up** once the meeting is completed. Following up with participants helps to prevent spending too much time reviewing what happened at a previous meeting, if additional meetings are required. Participants should be provided with the minutes of the meeting as soon as possible. Other materials generated during the meeting, such as anything written on flipcharts, should also be saved as records of the meeting and what actually occurred.

Conducting a Contentious Public Meeting

While the suggestions above are relevant to meetings regardless of whether conflict is likely to emerge, there are several additional actions to be taken when conflict is likely to exist. One of the first steps in managing conflict is to recognize it.

Where conflict or the potential for conflict is obvious, one important consideration is the use of a **neutral or third party facilitator** if the convening individual or organization is the source of controversy. Neutral and trained facilitators do not have a strong sense of personal involvement in the issue at hand and, thus, are able to implement a process that is deemed fair by the participants. In potentially contentious situations, it is helpful to avoid heavy-handed or authoritarian meeting facilitators as they often challenge audiences to express resentment and anger. If meeting participants respect the meeting process, they will typically support the facilitator and avoid escalating the hostility or tension. A facilitator that actively listens, acknowledges, and understands participants' comments, and who avoids appearing to approve or disapprove of comments, is quite effective. The use of flipcharts can encourage active listening and also can provide a written record of comments and concerns voiced at the meeting.

In addition, facilitators must also effectively maintain order and structure. Often, in a hostile situation, problems and interruptions occur that require the facilitator to act.

Rather than a facilitator imposing a solution, he or she should state the problem and engage the audience in helping to identify solutions. The identification of ground rules at the start of the meeting can help the facilitator maintain order if problems arise. For example, if a participant is acting in a disruptive manner, the facilitator will remind the individual of the ground rules to stop the behavior. If the behavior does not change, the facilitator, with the group's assistance, should intervene. If this sanctioning does not work, the meeting may be adjourned or appropriate civil authorities may need to be called to assist in removing the individual from the meeting.

Conclusion

In summary, meetings that are poorly run are often not able to meet the expectations of participants. They typically neither have clearly defined purposes, a clear agenda, nor effectively engage participants in a process to resolve the problem at hand. One of the most important ways to overcome these obstacles is to plan. If conflict is suspected to arise in a public meeting, one of the most important

aspects of planning includes deciding whether or not a neutral facilitator is needed.

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