



Youth *in action*

September 1999 NUMBER 10



Meetings—Make Them Work!

What Is a Good Meeting?

A meeting is a gathering of people to present or exchange information, plan joint activities, make decisions, or carry out actions already agreed upon. Almost every group activity or project requires a meeting, or meetings, of some sort.

Knowing how to hold efficient and effective meetings can help make projects successful. In a good meeting, participants' ideas are heard, decisions are made through group discussion and with reasonable speed, and activities are focused on desired results. Good meetings help generate enthusiasm for a project, build skills for future projects, and provide participants with techniques that may benefit them in their future careers.

Good meetings require good leaders and good participants. A good leader understands the purpose of a meeting, makes sure that all participants understand this purpose, helps keep the discussion on track, works with participants

to carry out the business of the meeting in the time allotted, and tries to ensure that everyone is involved appropriately in discussions. These responsibilities often require a leader to distribute an agenda and other written materials prior to a meeting.

Good participants come to a meeting prepared for the business at hand—with reports ready, concerns over key issues thought out, and questions about key issues organized. They also bring to the table their best listening skills and group manners. These participants, for example, take turns talking, stay on the point of discussion, and help to move decisions forward.

from the administrator

Good meetings depend on good leaders and good participants—leaders who understand the meeting's purpose and are able to keep it on track and participants who come prepared to contribute to sound decisions. Knowing how to plan and run productive meetings can make the difference between success and failure for your project.

This Bulletin will provide you with step-by-step instructions to conduct effective meetings that will generate enthusiasm for your project, along with resources for planning successful projects.

What Does It Take To Plan and Run a Productive Meeting?

Any successful meeting has a structure. Each part may be more or less developed; sometimes (especially in informal meetings) parts are barely visible. Here are eight setup tasks for those who wish to lead successful meetings.

Set a Time That Works

Choose a time of day when people are not likely to be tired, hungry, or otherwise distracted. Let people know that you will begin the meeting on time and take attendance with a sign-up sheet. Also let them know that minutes of the meeting will be taken. Before the meeting, ask a member of the group to take minutes. This way, the person will be prepared with a notebook, pen or pencil, and agenda.

Set a realistic time limit for meetings (for example, a 2-hour meeting that will begin at 1 p.m. and end at 3 p.m.). Try to stick to the time limit. Make sure the meeting room is free of distractions. Holding a meeting in the main room of a busy restaurant may sound like fun,

but the likelihood of accomplishing anything meaningful there is slim.

Set an Agenda

An agenda helps spell out the items and issues to be discussed and the results that everyone expects. For some groups, reports from officers, approval of minutes from a previous meeting, and reports from subcommittees are routine for general meetings. There may be specific old and new business. In other situations, a meeting may focus on making decisions or recommendations on a series of issues.

An agenda should help participants see what will be expected of them. You may want to leave time for suggestions from the group about any new subjects that participants want to discuss. Don't forget to review the agenda as you start the meeting to let participants know what to expect and to find out whether additional items need to be addressed.

Distribute Available Written Materials in Advance of the Meeting

Sending out a draft agenda and any available proposals or reports a week or two ahead of the meeting helps participants think through issues, prepare for discussions, and feel more comfortable making decisions.

Set Up Tasks and Divide Chores

You may be very energetic, but you are only one person. Dividing the chores—asking specific group members to report on specific topics, establishing a subcommittee to investigate a major issue, or getting someone to help with finding resources—helps strengthen the group and makes for more productive meetings in two ways. First, more work gets done. Second, the

Planning a Successful Project

For more information on how to plan a successful project, see the National Youth Network's Planning a Successful Crime Prevention Project. This 28-page workbook explains the five steps of the Success Cycle:

- ◆ *Assessing Your Community's Needs.*
- ◆ *Planning a Successful Project.*
- ◆ *Lining Up Resources.*
- ◆ *Acting on Your Plans.*
- ◆ *Nurturing, Monitoring, and Evaluating.*

The workbook includes six worksheets for you to take notes on. You can get a copy of this planning workbook from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, listed in the Resources section. Good luck!

more your committee members are involved, and the more active and productive they are, the more committed they will be to the group's goals. Don't be afraid to delegate tasks!

Set Up Discussions So That Everyone Gets a Say

Discussing topics sometimes takes more time than you would like. Although there are ways to keep a discussion moving, it is essential that the person running the meeting preside impartially. Make sure that people who disagree have a chance to state their cases. Your job in facilitating discussions or debates is to be the referee, a person who does not show favor to people or their ideas. As a referee, you will allow discussion to flow and provide participants a chance to discuss differing opinions on issues. Your job is to bring opposing sides together by showing areas where they agree and asking how they can “give a little” to come to a decision that will permit a win-win outcome for everyone.

Set Up a Structure That Keeps Discussion Orderly

Keeping discussions organized and moving forward is a major task and often the most difficult one you will face. It is sometimes hard to remind participants to pay attention and stay on task. One way to head off these problems is to get your group to agree in advance on the operating rules for meetings. Rules may be as simple as “one speaker or topic at a time” or “everybody gets a chance to speak one time before anybody else speaks a second time on the same issue.”

Agreeing on rules ahead of time and deciding what you'll do if people ignore the rules will make it easier for you as chairperson to keep your group on task and your discussion on

target. You'll be enforcing the group's rules, not your own.

Set Up Ways To Stick to the Subjects

Too often, meetings run over their time limit because the group tries to do all the work through discussion, when finding the right answer may require some research. The group may get tangled in a conflict between two people who disagree on a topic that is not easily resolved.

A good way to deal with this problem is to move on to other business, agreeing to either leave the subject for a future meeting or have a smaller group (a specific committee) look into the issue. Bring up the idea of using a “parking lot”—some place to acknowledge unresolved issues or additional topics to ensure that they are brought up for later discussion.

Set Up Time To Summarize

Build in time at appropriate points during the meeting and especially at the end of the meeting to very briefly review and summarize what has taken place. If your meeting has dealt with complex or far-ranging topics, this is particularly important.

Building in time to summarize your meeting also affirms commitments others have made to the group and confirms everyone's understanding of decisions, next steps, and assignments of tasks to be completed. For example, stating that “George will reserve the auditorium; Mimi will ask the Mayor to speak; Larry will get approvals from the student council and the principal; and Dave and Jenny will draw up a program and arrange for printing” is a good way to reconfirm people's understanding of their tasks and the group's decisions.

What Does It Take To Keep a Meeting Moving in a Positive Direction?

Participants play an important role in a successful meeting. As a participant, you may be tempted to blurt out responses, correct the speaker immediately, or jump right into the argument. Yielding to these temptations may lead to unproductive discussions or decisions made without careful thought. Being a good participant means understanding your role, your rights, and your responsibilities.

Remember Your Right to Politeness and Progress

You have a right, as a member of the group, to expect an orderly discussion leading to a decision. Showing courtesy to any speaker, staying on task, allowing both sides in a dispute an opportunity to be heard by all—these are not just nice manners. They are necessary for conducting your group's business effectively.

State Your Point of View

If you disagree with a proposal, don't assume that you should be quiet just because no one else has said anything. State your concerns courteously, clearly, and constructively. For example, you might suggest, "I agree that we should hold the meeting, but how about having it on a Wednesday at the local high school? I think a community meeting on Sunday night at City Hall would not be well attended."

Disagree Without Being Disagreeable

You do not have to go along with every decision. When a vote is called for, you can vote yes when everyone else votes no, or vice versa, and still be a team player and an effective participant. Sulking, leaving the room, or

threatening to withdraw your support if things do not go your way will mark you as a poor team player and a poor leader.

Learn by Observation

A good way to pick up on some meeting skills is to observe a few in action. Attend a meeting of your local town council or parent-teacher association. What skills do the meeting leaders demonstrate? How do effective participants get their points across? What behavior do you find inappropriate or offensive?

What Are Some of the Challenges to Conducting Meetings?

The following list offers some points on meeting logistics. If you take care of these things before the meeting, it is more likely to run smoothly. If not, you could run into all sorts of problems. Just imagine showing up at a meeting location to find that a room is already occupied, or, even worse, showing up at the meeting place but finding no participants there because you told everyone the wrong time.

- ◆ Make sure the meeting space is a comfortable area, where everyone will be able to see and hear the others in the group. The room should be neither too hot nor too cold and should provide proper lighting.
- ◆ Make sure the meeting space has been reserved for the time and date agreed upon.
- ◆ Remind participants of the meeting time, date, and place with a phone call, an e-mail, or a broadcast over the school's public address system. A postcard reminder can be a helpful reminder for groups that meet only a few times a year. Also, sending out an agenda in advance helps participants think through the issues before they come to the meeting, ensuring that the meeting can move ahead smoothly.

- ◆ Check at least a week in advance with anyone who is expected to present a report to the group. Make sure that everyone involved is clear on the subject of the report and confirm that there will be a sufficient number of any handouts.
- ◆ Examine logistical needs. Do you need a TV, VCR, overhead projector, or flipcharts? Will you serve refreshments? Will you need additional chairs or a coatrack?

How Can a Meeting Be Evaluated?

Evaluating meetings is a complex process. Evaluating your meetings can help you learn whether you have met your goals, but only if you decide up front what you want to evaluate and how you will go about doing so. In general, the purpose of conducting an evaluation is “to answer practical questions of decision-makers and program implementors who want to know whether to continue a program, extend it to other sites, modify it, or close it down.”¹ In this case, substitute “meeting” for program.

If your group intends to hold meetings on a regular basis, you will want to evaluate the effectiveness of the first few meetings. Consider whether the group accomplished its work, whether everyone understood the followup actions and the impact of decisions, whether all the participants felt that they had an opportunity to be heard, and whether disagreements were settled reasonably well. Once you’ve gained experience conducting meetings with your particular group, you will find that you can make many of these assessments automatically. Until then, this checklist may be helpful:

- ◆ Take attendance. At the beginning of every meeting, make note of who is there, who came in late, and who said they would be there but didn’t show up. This can be done formally, as a teacher records attendance in a notebook, or informally by passing around a sign-in sheet. Assess your records after a few meetings to see who comes regularly and who is always late. These observations can tell you who is committed to your group and its mission and whether the meeting time or location is inconvenient for some participants.
- ◆ Did the meeting start and end on time? If not, why? Did the group have too much business scheduled? Were discussions unfocused? What needs to happen at the next meeting to enable you to begin and end as promised?
- ◆ Was there an agenda that was understandable to all? Did people have the opportunity to add to the agenda? Was the agenda followed? If not, was the agenda too ambitious, or was there some other reason? If so, what helped you stay on track and reach decisions?
- ◆ Were the logistics appropriate and helpful? Think about room temperature, physical setup, refreshments, and the site’s accessibility to members.
- ◆ Did the discussion leading to a decision provide enough time for pros and cons to be aired? Were issues thoughtfully reviewed or was the decision rushed? Was too much time spent talking about issues rather than making decisions?
- ◆ What decisions were made at the meeting and whose work or interests do they affect? Do these people know about and understand the implications and any new commitments or responsibilities they have as a result?

¹ National Crime Prevention Council, *What, me evaluate?* Washington, DC: National Crime Prevention Council, 1986.

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- ◆ Pay attention to the responsiveness of the participants. Did any one person dominate the discussion? Were there people who should have spoken but did not?
 - ◆ Was the chair or president's facilitation of the meeting smooth and constructive? Do members feel that everyone understood what was happening and what had happened? Do members believe they had reasonable opportunities to state their views? Do they feel that everyone was treated fairly?
 - ◆ What was the best thing about the meeting? What was the worst thing? What should be repeated and what should be improved?

Each of these questions can help you spot problems and may suggest corrective action. The checklist can also identify strengths of your meetings, which you can build on in future meetings.

In addition to these techniques, evaluation may include thoughtful discussions with individual group members about your leadership style in meetings and how you can improve it. This can be a sensitive subject and one that may be hard on your ego. Consider carefully whether you are comfortable inviting and receiving direct criticism. If you are, honest and constructive criticism may help you improve your skills.

Learning to evaluate the things you do is a good skill, one you can apply to all aspects of your life. Good luck with your meeting and—Make it a good one!



Resources

For more information, consult your local library for these and other reference materials: *Effective Meeting Skills* by Marion Haynes and *How to Run a Successful Meeting in Half the Time* by Milo O. Frank.

You may also want to contact one of the following organizations or visit the U.S. Department of Justice Kids Page Web site at www.usdoj.gov/kidspage. This site includes information for kids, youth, parents, and teachers.

American Institute of Parliamentarians

P.O. Box 2173
Wilmington, DE 19899
302-762-1811
302-762-2170 (fax)
Internet: www.aipparlipro.org

Association of Junior Leagues, Inc.

660 First Avenue
New York, NY 10016
212-683-1515
212-481-7196 (fax)

Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse

P.O. Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000
800-638-8736
301-519-5212 (fax)
Internet: www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org

League of Women Voters of the United States

1730 M Street NW.
Washington, DC 20036
202-429-1965
202-429-0854 (fax)
Internet: www.lwv.org

National Crime Prevention Council

1700 K Street NW., Second Floor
Washington, DC 20006-3817
202-466-6272
202-296-1356 (fax)
Internet: www.ncpc.org

This Bulletin was produced by the National Crime Prevention Council as part of the National Citizens' Crime Prevention Campaign under a cooperative agreement with the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The National Crime Prevention Council is a nonprofit organization that conducts demonstration and youth-based programs, produces publications and training materials on a variety of subjects, and manages the day-to-day activities of the National Citizens' Crime Prevention Campaign.

Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, BJA, or the U.S. Department of Justice.

The National Youth Network, founded and managed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, consists of diverse youth leaders from across the Nation who are sponsored by youth-serving organizations. The goal of the Network is to recognize and build upon the power and importance of youth leadership by uniting young people and adults, through communication and action, to enable youth organizations and nonaffiliated youth to have a positive, formidable impact in our communities and throughout our Nation.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

U.S. Department of Justice

Office of Justice Programs

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Washington, DC 20531

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