

608 GUIDE FOR COMMITTEE MEETINGS

MEMBERS

1. Periodical meetings are apt to attract many members. Have the right members been invited and is their attendance really necessary? Do not duplicate unnecessarily.
2. Could the meeting be reduced to a standing core and other members invited only as and when required.
3. Have the members sufficient knowledge of the subject to be discussed, or would it be a good thing to get a specialist to introduce it?
4. Is it absolutely necessary for all members to be present during the whole of the proceedings? If not, has the agenda been drawn up with due regard to that fact?

NOTICE

1. Is the meeting really necessary, or could it be combined with one at a later date?
2. Does this meeting have to be convened periodically and at these intervals of time?
3. Should documents be sent together with this notice which would arrive too late if enclosed with the agenda?

AGENDA

1. Are there enough important points, or is this meeting being convened to discuss a "ragged" agenda? Determine from the members in advance if they have items to place on the agenda. It is better to postpone a meeting than to hold one facing an unimportant agenda.
2. Are the points of the agenda mature for discussion, or do they require any further preparation? A complicated subject should sometimes be discussed within a small circle, or else preliminary advice or an informative note should be submitted.
3. Sometimes the same points reappear on the agenda regularly under the same titles, despite the fact that various aspects of them have been disposed of. Has it become a routine? Subdivide general subjects so that members may realize that progress is being made.

4. Arrange the points that take up most time in order of importance. Let the meeting begin with a few points in which only statements are made. Keep for the last such points as you wish to have discussed more thoroughly at subsequent meetings.
5. Do not introduce each point yourself, but let the most expert or qualified do it. Have his name placed on the agenda and let him know in advance that you expect a short introduction from him. If many figures or facts are to be put before the meeting, ask the introducer to present an informative note or write these on a blackboard or flip chart in advance.
6. Are the items on the agenda well described? Is each item adequately explained? Do not place any item on the agenda that could be decided outside the meeting equally well or to better advantage.

PRELIMINARIES

1. Even if the minutes are not read to the meeting, make yourself acquainted with the decisions taken last time and, after the meeting has been opened, ask whether the necessary has been done to give effect to those decisions. This does not apply to the points recurring on the agenda.
2. Try to make up your own mind as to roughly how much time is to be allotted to the most important points on the agenda.
3. Allow for enough breaks.
4. Make a note beside each item on the agenda of the name of the person most qualified to speak on the subject and call on him first.
5. Do not deal with any item on the agenda which could be dealt with outside the meeting equally well.

CONDUCTING THE MEETING

1. Ask whether the minutes of the previous meeting call for any comment, but try to avoid duplicating it.
2. Consider the expediency of dealing first with items on the agenda for which certain members have been specially convened, so that they need only attend for a short time.
3. If possible, let other members take the chair from time to time.
4. Analyze the problems together with the members, sum up the essential points and take stock of the opinions held by the group.
5. Encourage members to take part in the discussion.
6. Link the views expressed, and see that members discuss their experience.

7. Keep the discussion well in hand; prevent it from becoming too emotional; do not let anyone, including yourself, monopolize discussion.
8. Lay down the points of agreement.
9. Sum up from time to time.
10. Direct discussion toward a conclusion.
11. At the end, recapitulate clearly and briefly any conclusions and arrangements reached.

QUESTIONS

Proceedings can also be guided by asking questions, such as the following:

In order to draw attention to a point that has not yet been discussed: May I have your opinion on an aspect that no one so far has brought forward? I mean ...

To test an argument: Mr. A. has just advanced a new point. Would you tell me how you feel about it.

To test the value of the source of information submitted: Where did that information come from? Who is this Mr. X. to whom you referred just now? Where does Mr. X. find his facts? Is he a qualified man?

To arrest digressions: What point are we really discussing?

If the discussion was disappointing, or the problem had not yet come to maturity: What would you say to our thinking over the whole question quietly by ourselves and having it put on the agenda again in a month's time?

If the group is prejudiced:

I wonder whether our own interest in this matter is making us take too one-sided a view of it?

OBSTACLES TO THE DISCUSSION

I LANGUAGE

1. Using vague terms. Remedy: It is useful, but not enough, to ask your challenger to give a definition. If you do not understand a term, or cannot see clearly what it is intended to imply, ask for concrete examples by way of illustration.
2. Exploiting the emotional value of words for the conscious or unconscious purpose of disguising a weak argument by the frequent use of emotionally charged words. Remedy: Substitute "neutral" words for these, thus facilitating an objective appraisal of the reasoning and clarifying its true value.

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II JUDGEMENT

1. Generalizing by basing a categorical judgement on insufficient evidence. Remedy: Ask the speaker to state the grounds upon which his opinion is founded. "Are you sure you have examined enough cases to warrant such a sweeping statement? Have you made due allowance for those cases which do not fit into the picture?" Advise the speaker to keep his mind flexible, that is, to be prepared to change his mind if new facts should call for it.
2. Oversimplification, that is "settling" a complicated matter in a few words. Remedy: Point out calmly that matters are not quite as simple as your challenger makes them out to be.
3. Loose thinking, exemplified by stating that something "is" this or that because it "ought to be" or "must be"". Remedy: Point out that conclusions with regard to the facts can only be based on other facts, not on the speaker's conviction that something "should by rights be so-in-so" or "surely must be so".

III ARGUMENT

1. The "ding dong" argument, that is, doggedly repeating one's own opinion without touching on the other person's arguments. Remedy: Point this out to your challenger, and then advance the for and against arguments for discussion. If this also fails, break off the discussion.
2. Measuring by two standards, that is, accepting an argument in one case and abruptly refusing to accept it in another. Remedy: Ask the speaker if he wishes to adhere to the argument advanced as it is. Then apply this argument in both cases.
3. Facing somebody with a dilemma. Remedy: Refuse to recognize the alternative; put it to the person in question that he is flatly ignoring all the possible compromises.
4. Sidetracking. One way is to tempt a speaker to digress from his initial theme by unobtrusively shifting the discussion to another sphere. Remedy: Bring the discussion back to its starting point.
5. Driving someone into a corner, for example, by insidiously imputing a statement to him which he had not made at all, or had not made in that way. Remedy: Do not allow yourself to be put out, and stick quietly to your initial position.

1. Assure that all essential people at the meeting get copies of the minutes.
2. After each meeting, discuss with the secretary the names of others who should receive a copy to enable him to implement the decisions.
3. In the margin of the minutes, make a note of the name of the person who has undertaken a task, or underline beside every decision the words "Mr. X has undertaken to ...".
4. Discuss with the secretary whether the minutes are to be a true record of all opinions expressed, or a businesslike resume of the decisions reached and the instructions issued as a result of the discussions.
5. Quote the numbers and descriptions of the items on the agenda in the report.

FOLLOW-UP

1. The chairman or secretary should make it a practice to ascertain whether the decisions made at the meeting have been or are being carried out and, if not, take the necessary steps to see that they are.
2. Consider giving the group at the meeting time periodically to criticize the proceedings and the chairman's leadership. Encourage those present to offer suggestions for improvement.