

Chairing a Meeting

Why do meetings fail? Well, there may be reasons such as lack of time, a badly designed agenda or an unsatisfactory venue. However, if the chair is doing his (or her) job, it should be possible to overcome these difficulties.

Preparation

Chairing a meeting means ensuring that a meeting achieves its aims. The meeting should have been called for a specific purpose and all discussion at the meeting must be steered to this end. This may sound simple in theory but in practice it can be a very demanding task. Participants should be given an agenda outlining the work for the meeting and should receive any papers prior to the meeting. Ensure that you have someone assigned to take concise, non-judgmental minutes.

Impartiality

A chair is like a judge in a court. He should ensure that all participants have an opportunity to express their point of view. It can be difficult to leave your own opinions at home, but you have to remain impartial and objective. Don't get sucked into personal opinions and judgments.

Assertiveness

Ensuring that everyone gets a hearing will almost certainly involve stopping someone from dominating the proceedings. The more contentious the issue the more likely you are to require firmness. You don't need to be rude or dogmatic. Phrases such as "I think we should hear from Ms. Smith on this" or "can we have some comments from the engineering department on this" should be sufficient in most cases. Once you provide this opening, however, you need to ensure that there are no interruptions while the next speaker has their say.

Staying on course

How often have you seen an agenda left totally aside? The meeting starts off well but becomes embroiled in a particular topic (perhaps the first item on the agenda) and ends when time runs out. A Chair must assess the importance of each item on the agenda, and allot time to each topic as required. If one issue begins to dominate the chair must take control. You might suggest a further meeting to discuss the issue at a later date, or that the main parties concerned could continue the discussion at the end of the meeting. Sometimes it will be necessary to call for a decision and then move on to the next topic. You need to stay alert and make sure that the issue has been given an adequate and impartial hearing within the allotted time.

Summarising

Summarising can be used to end a topic, to end a discussion, to limit the need for discussion and at the end of a meeting to ensure that everyone has a clear overview of what took place or what action is now required. It is an invaluable skill for a chair. Summarizing requires active listening. You have to state concisely what was said in an impartial way and end with a clear statement

about what is expected to happen next. It takes practice to summarize well, but it is a skill well worth developing.

Many people feel that being a chair means opening the meeting and stopping rows. There is much more to it than that. Prior to the meeting, a chair should consult with the secretary regarding the agenda, ensure that all interested parties have been notified, assess the level of interest and the potential for divisiveness for each item, and allot time to each item, based on decisions required and number of people attending.

During the meeting, the chair must focus on the decisions required of the meeting, ensure that all participants are accorded adequate time, decide when to end debate on each topic, use appropriate questions to elucidate information or re-direct discussion, listen carefully to all contributions, and clearly summarize proceedings with an emphasis on decisions taken and future plans.

The above are all key ingredients for a fruitful meeting. A tactful but assertive chair will facilitate an effective meeting, and that's what everyone wants.

Tips and guidelines

For a first meeting

Don't

- talk too much as the chair
- cover too much
- have it lasting too long
- assume everyone has the same knowledge or knows what you are talking about

Do

- get organised in advance
- have a written agenda
- introduce yourself, perhaps new members or others observing don't know who you are
- make everyone feel comfortable
- have a method to get members' ideas ie. brainstorming, open debate
- have expectations about how members should give input
- finish on time

Chairing ongoing meetings

- Discussion - let members know when discussion has drifted from the topic. Usually they will quickly return to it. Remind members of the topic and the goals of the meeting
- Summarise what less active members have said and link associated points together. Accept parts of ideas and ask for them to be developed.

- State the problem - never blame anyone, state in a constructive manner. Clear up what decisions the group has to make, do not waste time on other things
- Avoid -
 - taking sides
 - becoming a participant of the discussion
 - manipulating the group towards your own agenda
 - criticising the values and ideas of others
 - forcing your own ideas on the group, if necessary have someone else chair the meeting so you can take part
 - making decisions for the members without asking them for agreement
 - saying too much
- Summarise agreed tasks and those allocated to carry them out
- Agree a date for the next meeting
- Start - as close to the start time as possible, people's time is invaluable
- Finish - on time, if not before.

National Communications Unit
Version 2 March 2009