

**14**

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**MEETINGS**



# 14: MEETINGS

This Section looks at the function of board of management meetings and ways in which meetings can be made more effective.

Though it specifically looks at board of management meetings the information applies to meetings of any sort.

## ***BOARD OF MANAGEMENT MEETINGS***

Board of management meetings are the tool through which the board manages a community group. The main features of board of management meetings are:

- They are usually held monthly.
- They are usually attended by the manager or senior staff person, who reports on the operations of the service, answers any queries and provides advice to the board. The manager's report would include activities planned for the coming month and any other issues.
- A monthly financial report is tabled including financial estimates for the next month.

## **FORMAL OR INFORMAL MEETINGS**

Meetings can be formal or informal. There is no requirement either way. Participants of the meeting should decide if they want the meeting to follow formal rules of meetings where decision making is by way of motions and formal voting, or if they want more informal meetings which dispense with motions.

For community organisations with fairly small boards of management, formal meetings may intimidate or scare people off. Informal meetings are often more natural for people. Many groups adopt a semi-formal approach allowing the chairperson to control the meeting but not requiring formal motions.

See the box below for details on running a formal meeting.

## **ASSESS YOUR BOARD OF MANAGEMENT MEETINGS**

Before continuing with this section you may like to assess the way your board of management meetings currently work. You can use the checklist at the end of this section.

## **RUNNING A FORMAL MEETING**

***In a formal meeting the chairperson controls the meeting and all discussion takes place through the chairperson. Thus only one person can speak at a time and they must address the meeting 'through the chair'. That is, if a person wishes to speak they will obtain permission from the chairperson by saying 'through the chair'. This restricts comments to one person at a time.***

***The chairperson will ensure that only one issue is put before the meeting at a time and then directs the question to the appropriate people, ensuring that the questions are addressed and controlling the amount of discussion. The chairperson will ensure that everyone in the meeting gets a say and that the confident and articulate people do not dominate the meeting.***

### ***The procedure for formal meetings is***

*"The meeting is run according to the rules of debate and is controlled by an elected chairperson, who is responsible to the participants.*

*All discussion takes place through the chairperson, who is responsible for:*

- *Being familiar with the rules of the group*
- *Opening the meeting and explaining what it is about*
- *Introducing speakers, guests and new members*
- *Having an agenda ready to propose to the meeting*
- *Directing the meeting by:*
  - *steering questions to those people who can/should answer them*
  - *ensuring everyone gets a chance to speak out*
  - *controlling the length of speeches*
  - *keeping the meeting moving along*
  - *keeping one issue 'before the chair' at a time*
  - *summarising the discussion at the end of each point and at the end of the whole meeting*
  - *accepting motions and controlling debate in accordance with the rules.*

***The Procedure*** - *the chairperson works through the agenda. For each item the chairperson:*

- *Clarifies the item, and*
- *Calls for a motion or proposal for action.*

*The chairperson should accept a motion if:*

1. *It is relevant to the item being discussed and the aims of the group.*
2. *The meaning is clear and in the form of a positive proposition.*

*If the motion contains a number of proposals the chairperson can seek the mover's permission to handle each proposal separately.*

**Amendments** – *if people in the meeting want to make changes or add to the motion they may do so, providing the spirit of the motion is maintained. The mover may agree to incorporate amendments into the motion in which case no debate of the amendments will be required. If the mover of the motion does not agree, however, the amendments are debated first, and, if accepted, become part of the motion. The motion is then debated and voted on. The chairperson must accept an appropriate amendment if there is a seconder, and all amendments are dealt with before a vote can be taken on the motion.*

*When the motion before the meeting is clear the mover speaks in its support (speaking times may be limited by the group's rules, for example, 2 to 3 minutes each). The chairperson calls for further speakers, usually accepting at least two speakers against and one in favour if there are that many people wishing to speak. The mover then has a right of reply, that is, s/he can respond to the points made in opposition.*

*The chairperson then puts the motion to the vote."*

***Based on an article, the source of which is unknown***

## **DEALING WITH CORRESPONDENCE**

### **NOTE!**

There are two ways of dealing with correspondence. The first, which is probably most appropriate to smaller organisations or ones which have small amounts of correspondence, is where each letter received is read out at the board of management meeting and a decision is made as to what should go in the reply. The secretary would later draft and send the reply.

The alternative is for the secretary to table a list of all correspondence received in the last month at the meeting, but only letters of particular importance would be read out. If board of management members are interested in particular items, these can also be raised at the meeting or looked at after the meeting. The secretary or staff member can be delegated to deal with more 'run of the mill' correspondence.

## **AGENDAS**

Use a fixed agenda for meetings. In this way people become familiar and comfortable with the process and are likely to participate more. Meetings without any structure tend to become too informal or tend to become dominated by a few people.

Additionally, using a fixed agenda will ensure that important items are not forgotten.

In the boxes below are example agendas for board of management meetings and an annual general meeting.

### **BOARD OF MANAGEMENT MEETING**

#### **EXAMPLE AGENDA FORMAT**

1. Open Meeting
2. Apologies  
(Remind secretary to make a note of the people present.)
3. Review of Agenda  
(Read out main agenda items.)
4. Minutes from Previous Meeting  
(Run through the minutes of the previous meeting and confirm with participants that they are accurate. The chairperson should then sign them as accepted.)
5. Correspondence  
(Ask the secretary to report on any correspondence in and out.)
6. Reports: (Keep them brief)
  - Financial
  - Manager/Coordinator
  - Sub-Boards
7. General Business
  - Action from previous meeting  
(List items from the previous meeting which need to be reported on or require further discussion.)
  - New business  
(List new items for discussion. Allow for other items to be raised at the meeting.)
8. Next Meeting
9. Close

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

**EXAMPLE AGENDA FORMAT**

1. Welcome
2. Chairperson's Report
3. Treasurer's Report and Receipt of Audited Financial Statements for the Previous Financial Year
4. Managers/Coordinators Report
5. Election of Office Bearers
6. Appointment of Auditor
7. Other Business
8. Close

**ROLE OF THE RETURNING OFFICER**

Most constitutions specify that at the Annual General Meeting a returning officer will be elected by the meeting to manage the election of the board of management positions.

The returning officer takes charge of the meeting as soon as the current chairperson announces the election of board members.

The returning officer will:

- Declare the board positions vacant
- Run the election
- Put in place a secret ballot if requested to do so by the board
- Declare the results of the election
- Hand back control of the meeting to the presiding chairperson.

**QUORUMS**

A quorum is the minimum number of people required at a meeting in order for it to be a valid meeting.

The quorum is specified in the constitution of the organisation. The chairperson should know exactly what the constitution says about the quorum and should make sure that there is a quorum at every meeting before the meeting proceeds. If there is not a quorum the meeting could be declared invalid and the decisions of the meeting ignored.

### **CHAIRING MEETINGS**

Effective meetings rely on the skills of the chairperson. With a good chairperson meetings stay focused and productive with clear decisions being made. With a poor chairperson, meetings wander all over the place with very few decisions being made.

Fortunately, the skill of chairing a meeting effectively can be learned. Without doubt, some people do make a better chairperson than others, but everyone can become an effective chairperson.

### **THE EFFECTIVE CHAIRPERSON**

An effective chairperson:

- Knows the constitution and its requirements for meetings.
- Starts the meetings on time.
- Makes sure there is an agenda and follows it.
- Introduces discussion items with a brief summary of issues or pros and cons.
- Maintains control of the meeting but not to the point where people's ideas and input are stifled.
- Asks people to be quiet (in a nice way) when they have side conversations.
- Encourages light heartedness and allows some joking and straying from the agenda but always pulls the meeting back to task.
- Does not express their own views very much but focuses on making sure everyone else is getting an opportunity to have their say and are remaining focused on the issue.
- Listens carefully and draws discussion to a close when everyone has had a say and a clear decision needs to be made or has been made.
- Clarifies and double checks with the group the decision that has been made, presenting it in simple, straight forward language and asking people to confirm the decision.
- Always makes sure that when a decision is made someone is identified to carry it out and a timeline is set.
- Clarifies the decision and follow up action for the secretary and makes sure the secretary has enough time to write it down before moving onto the next item.
- Is alert to people's feelings, will draw quiet people in and will give disgruntled people a chance to 'get things off their chest'.

**THINK ABOUT!**

Consider rotating the chairperson's job between people who are interested. This will give other people a chance to learn chairing skills.

In all, a good chairperson needs to be assertive and confident (a loud voice sometimes helps!), but luckily these are qualities which can be developed through practice.

**REMEMBER...**

The chairperson does not have any special power or any greater responsibility than any other member of the board of management, except perhaps to have a casting vote in situations of a tied vote on an issue.

As with the treasurer and secretary, the chairperson is simply assigned some tasks to do and one of these is to chair meetings.

**DEALING WITH PROBLEMS IN MEETINGS**

Below, are some of the more common problems people have with meetings and some ideas for the chairperson to help deal with them:

- **Meetings never start on time because people are always late**

At the next meeting, explain to people that meetings are not starting on time and that this really is unfair on those people who do come on time.

Ask if people wish to change the starting time.

Ask people to make a commitment to arrive at the agreed time.

As long as you have a quorum always start the meeting on time.

Put on refreshments before the meeting and start the meeting on time with drinks not available to late comers.

In the meeting, do not repeat agenda items already dealt with for late comers.

In the meeting do not make jokes about late comers. Continue the work of the meeting while they are shuffling around and getting organised. It is harder then for people to brush off being late as something humorous.

Develop a code of behaviour for meetings. One item will be 'arrive on time'. An Example of a Code of Behaviour for Meetings is shown below.

### ***EXAMPLE CODE OF BEHAVIOUR FOR MEETINGS***

Develop a code of behaviour for meetings in consultation with participants. This will highlight for people what is expected of them. The code of behaviour could include:

- Arrive on time
- Follow the agenda
- No side conversations
- People to speak through the chairperson
- Prepare for meetings by reading previous minutes, discussion papers or other materials before the meeting
- Do not dominate the meeting - give everyone a chance to contribute
- Encourage quiet people to participate
- Listen to and respect the views of other people
- Be open, positive and friendly - give praise.
- Criticise ideas - not people - no personal attacks.
- Carry out tasks or jobs on time
- The chairperson is to facilitate the meeting and not contribute except when raising issues or making a point not raised by anyone else.

#### ▪ **Side conversations**

Set a good example by never doing it yourself.

Ask people to speak through the chairperson, that is, in order to speak they must get permission from the chairperson.

Start with a gentle "Shhhh".

Ask people if they would mind telling the rest of the group what they are talking about.

Stop the meeting and ask people if they could please not have side conversations as they make it hard for other people to concentrate on the meeting.

If the same people persist, ask them to leave the meeting to talk and come back when they have finished.

■ **People doze off, keep fidgeting or, their attention wanders**

Check the meeting room:

- Are the chairs uncomfortable or too comfortable? If uncomfortable, people can't concentrate and they fidget. If the chairs are too comfortable, people doze off. Have chairs with padded seats and a firm table
- Is the room stuffy? Make sure there is fresh air
- Is the room too hot or too cold? You might need a cooler or a heater or to find a better room
- Is the lighting okay? Too bright or too dull lighting works against a good meeting.

Check the noise level. Trying to hold meetings where you can hear other people talking is very difficult. Worse still is if you can see people doing other things.

Provide water, tea or coffee. Have it in the meeting room and people can (quietly) help themselves. This also makes a meeting more relaxed.

Check your handouts. If they are too wordy or too long, people won't read them or, people get tired reading them.

Keep the meeting moving. Simply put, your meeting may be too dull and too drawn out.

Shorten the discussions. Move for a decision as soon as everyone who wants to has had a say.

Make sure breaks are not too far apart. As chairperson, try to generate enthusiasm and liveliness in the way you speak and behave.

**HINT!**

As a rule people usually need only one or two opportunities to talk on an issue to express their view. Anything over this is most likely repetitive.

■ **Meetings are too long**

Once again, people may be getting bogged down and repeating themselves. Keep the meeting moving and call for decisions as soon as you think everyone has had a say.

Set time limits for people.

Check the meeting content. Are board of management meetings dealing with broad policy issues and directions or are they getting stuck in day-to-day operations which are better left to the manager or coordinator?

Request the manager to prepare briefing sheets on issues. These should be concise and should present the main points to be considered in a simple way. These should be given to people so they have time to read them before the meeting.

Are staff reports too long? Ideally, they should not be more than two pages long and should present broad issues and not operational details. Once again these should be given to people so they have time to read them before the meeting.

If too much time is spent in the meeting reading the minutes from the last meeting, make it a rule that people read them before the meeting.

**HINT!**

To improve attendance at board of management meetings include in your end of year or annual report the number of meetings and sub-board meetings members attended (out of the total number of meetings held) in the previous year.

- **Some people dominate and/or others do not participate**

Often in meetings one or more people will have the most to say with the result that other people give up and do not try to contribute.

Whether or not those people who dominate are contributing information of value is beside the point. Everyone who gives up their time to come to a meeting should be given an opportunity to contribute.

One technique for ensuring everyone has a say is a 'round robin'. This simply means going around the table and asking everyone to comment. If some people talk for too long, say something like, "Thanks for that, but we really must keep moving".

One danger with a 'round robin' is that people who do not want to speak feel pressured and uncomfortable. A solution is to have a more informal approach where the chairperson asks people to speak one at a time but not in any order and without pressure for everyone to speak.

**HINT!**

Try drawing out quiet people with - "Were you going to say something?"

If you try these techniques and some people still dominate, the chairperson may have to tell them straight out that they have had their say and could they let others have a turn. In the first instance, do this in a light hearted way and if that does not work, it may have to be said more sternly.

Try developing a code of behaviour for meetings which clearly states that each person must give everyone else an opportunity to participate. (See above: Example Code of Behaviour for Meetings.)

Another option is to talk to people on a one-to-one basis outside of the meeting. You could explain to them that their participation is valued, however, it is important that everyone gets involved to keep them interested in the organisation.

Finally, include as an agenda item 'Ways to Improve the Meeting' and encourage people to speak frankly. In fact, you can ask people if they think everyone is getting an opportunity to have a say and if they think some people are dominating. You can also ask for their ideas on how to improve the situation.

- **Discussion goes all over the place - people don't come to grips with the issue**

Take control of the meeting.

Clarify the issue to be considered and summarise the arguments so far. Use of a whiteboard can help enormously.

Use a 'round robin'.

If the issue is too complex for people to grasp, suggest a sub-board or staff person or both do up an issues paper for the next meeting and adjourn the discussion.

- **Conflict and bad feelings develop**

Try short breaks that allow members time to cool down.

A few moments silence gives people a chance to collect their thoughts and to maybe write down their ideas on the issues being discussed.

Break into small groups to brainstorm with each group reporting back to the meeting.

Clarify and summarise the main arguments. Help people to hear and understand what others are actually saying.

Stop the meeting or adjourn the debate until the next meeting, or, hold a special meeting.

Distribute information prior to the meeting. This gives people time to discuss the issue informally. It's a good idea to start the new discussion of the topic with a 'round robin' so everyone knows what others think.

Tightly control the meeting to prevent the discussion drifting into personal conflicts, attacks or old battles. Make sure members criticise ideas NOT the people holding them. Recognise that there is a place for feelings and make a special time for the group to deal with any bad feelings or personal conflicts if necessary.

Use an outside neutral facilitator or mediator for a few meetings to help the group move through the difficult issues.

- **The chairperson dominates the meeting**

It was noted earlier that the job of the chairperson is to facilitate the meeting and that their input should be limited to reminding people of key issues and making points which have not been raised by anyone else.

A most difficult situation in any meeting is when the chairperson wants to dominate the discussion.

This is best dealt with by getting the meeting to develop a code of behaviour for meetings which clearly states what the chairperson's role is. (See above: Example Code of Behaviour for Meetings.)

It is essential that the chairperson is part of this discussion.

If you do this and the chairperson still dominates, someone should point out to the chairperson, on a one-to-one basis, that the procedures are not being followed.

Another option is to put up as an item for discussion in a meeting, 'Ways to Improve Our Meetings' and ensure, before the meeting, that several people will make the point that the chairperson is dominating.

If all of the above fail then the chairperson is probably an inappropriate person for that position and hopefully will not be re-elected.

### ***HINT!***

Including as a fixed item at the end of a meeting 'Ways to Improve the Meeting' has helped many groups to achieve enormous improvements to meetings.

The key to success is a commitment from people to be open and honest and sensitive to other people's feelings.

## ***MINUTES***

### **WHAT ARE THEY?**

Minutes are a record of a meeting. They include information about attendance, the items which were discussed, the important things that happened and the decisions that were made. They should contain enough information so that a person who was not at the meeting can understand what happened.

Minutes provide part of the history of an organisation and are a written record of decisions which were made. Without written minutes people forget what decisions were made and arguments may arise. With written minutes people can refer back to them to find out exactly what was decided.

### **HOW TO TAKE GOOD MINUTES**

Good minutes depend on the chairperson and secretary working well together. Some ideas are:

1. The chairperson should stop the meeting, summarise the discussion and confirm with the meeting the decision which has been made.
2. The chairperson should then instruct the secretary as to what to record in the minutes.
3. If as secretary you get left behind in the discussion, ask the chairperson to wait while you write and if you are not sure if you have recorded something correctly, read it back to the meeting to check, and amend the minutes if necessary.
4. Keep the minutes brief, clear and concise and focus on recording decisions made and actions to be done.
5. Write up the minutes as soon as possible after the meeting while it is still fresh in your mind.
6. Distribute the minutes as soon as possible after the meeting so that people have a chance to follow up on their action.
7. When learning to take minutes practice alongside the regular minute taker and compare notes after the meeting as to what was recorded and what was left out. "Practice makes perfect."
8. If as secretary you are very interested in an agenda item and want to take part in the discussion it is probably best to ask someone else to record the minutes for that part of the meeting. It is not easy to take minutes when you are involved in the discussion.

### **WHAT IS INCLUDED IN THE MINUTES**

As a basic guide, minutes must include:

- The date of the meeting and time started.
- The place of the meeting.
- The names of those people present.
- Apologies from people unable to attend.
- Amendments to the minutes of the last meeting and a note certifying that the minutes of the last meeting were accepted by the meeting as accurate.

- The decisions made.

In organisations using formal procedures this will mean writing down the exact words of the motion passed at the meeting. (Sometimes the names of the mover and seconder are also noted.)

In informal meetings the chairperson should clarify with the meeting what is to go in the minutes.

- When a report is presented, this should be noted. It is not necessary to summarise the report itself unless you feel there is an important reason to do this. Copies of the report or information on how to obtain it could be circulated with the minutes.
- Any information that members want to make known e.g. someone from Centrelink will be visiting the organisation on 26.11.99 at 10 a.m.
- Who is to do what and when it is to be done by. This part of decision making is sometimes forgotten or never recorded and all kinds of problems can arise because of it. This information can usually be written next to the relevant decision or resolution or in an 'action' column.

If changes to policy and procedures are required as a result of the issues discussed at a meeting a note can be made in the minutes of meetings to update policy and procedures where relevant to ensure that the policy and procedures 'keep up with' organisational changes.

When minutes are sent out an action column reminds people of their tasks.

<b>EXAMPLE MINUTES SHEET</b>	
<b>Item</b>	<b>Action</b>

- Include brief notes on matters discussed, rejected ideas or amendments and the reason for rejection. This minimises later discussions and revision motions. (A revision motion is when the group changes its mind.)

<b>IMPORTANT!</b>	<p><b><i>It is not necessary to record everything that anyone says in a meeting. Generally, you only need to record decisions made or issues to be followed up. Record the fact that some people opposed a decision only when they specifically want it recorded.</i></b></p> <p><b><i>A good way for the secretary to stay on top of the minutes is to have the chairperson clarify with the group the decision made, before asking the secretary to note it.</i></b></p>
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### **EVALUATE YOUR BOARD OF MANAGEMENT MEETINGS**

*(Taken from: M.E. Hayes, Effective Meeting Skills)*

Consider your typical board of management meeting and tick those statements that apply :

- 1. An agenda is prepared prior to the meeting.
- 2. Meeting participants have an opportunity to contribute to the agenda.
- 3. Advance notice of meeting time and place is provided to those invited.
- 4. Meeting facilities are comfortable and adequate for the number of participants.
- 5. The meeting begins on time.
- 6. The meeting ends on time.
- 7. The use of time is monitored throughout the meeting.
- 8. Everyone has an opportunity to present his or her point of view.
- 9. Participants listen attentively to each other.
- 10. There are periodic summaries as the meeting progresses.
- 11. No one tends to dominate the discussion.
- 12. Everyone has a voice in decisions made at the meeting.
- 13. The meeting typically ends with a summary of decisions.
- 14. The meeting is periodically evaluated by participants.
- 15. People can be depended upon to carry out any action agreed to during the meeting.
- 16. Minutes of the meeting are provided to participants.
- 17. The chairperson follows up with participants on action agreed to during the meeting.
- 18. Board members can be counted on to attend each meeting.
- 19. Decisions are clearly stated to the group.
- 20. The secretary is given ample time to record decisions.

Number of Statements Ticked \_\_\_\_\_ x 5 = \_\_\_\_\_ Meeting Score

***A score of 80 or more indicates good quality meetings.***

***A score below 60 suggests work is required to improve the quality of your meetings.***

