

MEETING FACILITATION: TIPS FOR CHAIRS

The person chairing a meeting is in a position to significantly affect its productivity. The Chair's challenge is to create an appropriate balance between three main entities: people, issues and time. If one entity receives more attention than another, problems may surface. For example, if the Chair tries too hard to accommodate people, progress may be slow and minority views may control the meeting. If the Chair is too forceful and focuses on closure (issues) and efficiency (time), members may be frustrated, resentful and disengaged.

To create the appropriate balance between people, issues and time, the Chair's primary skills are listening and facilitation. This means the Chair does less talking and more listening and that s/he facilitates decision making and does not impose decisions on the group.

The Chair has the following duties during meetings:

Deciding who speaks next: Going by those who raise hands first and not by those who raise voices first (establishing a speakers' line up, if needed); intervening if members "barge in" without permission to speak or if they interrupt one another.

Establishing decorum: Encouraging civility and mutual respect; intervening if members use offensive or improper language, if they discuss personalities, or if they speculate on the motives of individuals ("Can we please speak about the issues, not the people").

Keeping the meeting on track: Reminding members of what is currently on the agenda; intervening if there are digressions.

Managing time: Facilitating collective decisions on the meeting's time frame, and if needed, on time limits on speeches; giving updates on time ("As we agreed, discussion of this proposal will end at 10 AM. It is now 9:50"); enforcing speaking time limits; asking (at appropriate times) whether anyone has something to add to the discussion and, if not, proceeding to closure.

Educating and advising: Offering procedural options to achieve results; identifying points of consensus, suggesting motions be offered if necessary, or working groups be formed to pursue further discussions.

Creating balance: Asking dominant members to give priority to those who have not spoken; creating opportunities for quieter members to enter the discussion ("Does anyone who has not spoken have something to add? How about you, Chad?").

Seeking inclusiveness: Reminding members that some participants may be working in a second language and may need encouragement to join discussions; suggesting a "buddy system" so that those who need assistance in the meeting language can sit with another participant who may be able to "translate" or summarize key points as the meeting progresses.

Ensuring clarity: Explaining the overall purpose at the start of the meeting; opening each agenda item by briefly explaining its nature and how it is set to unfold.

Encouraging listening: Minimizing back and forth arguments and encouraging members to hear one another prior to forming a rebuttal; discouraging the instinctive dismissal of unusual ideas or ones that did not work in the past.

Questioning: Listening for ambiguities, missed points, generalizations and misunderstanding, and raising appropriate questions (“*I must say I am puzzled by a few of the points made. For example: ----- . Am I missing something?*”)

Re-directing: Shifting the discussion from complaints and accusations to constructive channels; encouraging members who oppose something to propose an alternative.

Summarizing: From time to time, briefly repeating key points and concerns raised, and highlighting (in concise point form) apparent areas of agreement and disagreement.

Facilitating closure and follow up: Articulating the proposal being considered, ensuring that it is understood, and then assessing consensus informally or by raising hands; facilitating the assignment of follow up duties (not to the first volunteer but to the most qualified person or perhaps to a new member); confirming that the secretary is able to record the decisions made.