

A Guide to Meetings

This Resource is designed to offer your Club/League Committee good practice ideas when it comes to running your meetings. The ‘dreaded meeting’ can be run in a manner which is efficient, effective and painless! This document presents a range of information and ideas that we hope will result in the smooth and constructive running of your meetings.

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A. Ground Rules

When any group of people come together to hold discussions on areas of common interest and to make important decisions the process is helped by setting a clear guide for the way the meetings are conducted. The process of compiling the list of ground rules is important. During this process any areas where there may be potential disagreements will come up and allow for a discussion on how to proceed. Ground rules can be quite comprehensive and detailed. It is often quite easy to put together a list of principles for the way in which the group members will conduct themselves as they carry out the business of their meetings. Asking each member of the committee how they would want to be treated is a good place to begin.

Examples of simple ground rules:

That the opinions of all group members will be respected

Personal attacks on group members are not acceptable at any time

That all members will stay within the timelines of the meeting

A more complex rule might deal with group members speaking to the media:

No member will approach the media to make a comment and if approached by the media, will decline to give a response until advice has been sought from the chairperson or public relations officer.

B. The What, When and Why of Meetings

What types of meetings are there? Here are just a few:

1. Management Committee Meetings
2. Management Sub-Committee Meetings
3. General Meetings
4. Annual General Meetings
5. Formal meetings
6. Informal meetings
7. Celebrations
8. Rituals/Services

9. Information Days

10. Workshops or Training

Each member of the committee is responsible for ensuring that the Club complies with its rules about calling and holding meetings. There are a number of procedures that are required, for example:

- The Annual General Meeting must be held once in every twelve-month period and within three months of the close of the Club's financial year
- A Club must hold its first annual general meeting within 18 months of it been set up
- Club members are required to meet annually and the management committee must meet every 4 months (3 times a year)
- General meetings may be held at any time during the year. Whether the meetings are held once a month or more often is a decision for each Club. The first general meeting after the Club has been set up must not be less than one month and not more than three months after the set up date
- After the first general meeting, others may be called for a number of reasons and in a number of ways
- The duty to call the general meeting falls to the secretary. The secretary is to give not less than 14 days notice of general meetings to the members
- The management committee generally decides how notice will be given
- A meeting of the management committee can be called by not less than one third of the management committee requesting the secretary to do so
- A sub-committee may meet as it pleases, subject to the directions of the management committee

C. Decision Making

The work of the committee often involves making decisions about many different things. Each committee may have a different way of making those decisions and voting on whether to accept or reject proposals. When a meeting arrives at a point

where a decision or resolution needs to be made, each member will be asked to cast a vote. This vote will show whether they are for or against the idea that has been put forward. Casting one's vote can be done in various ways;

- In some meetings a show of hands is considered an appropriate method of recording the vote
- In certain settings and for a range of reasons people may ask for a poll. A poll is a written ballot. Each person would write yes or no on a piece of paper and the votes would then be counted. The advantage of this method is that no-one else knows how you vote
- Another less formal method is voting by the voices e.g. "All those in favour say 'yes'. Those against say 'no'"
- Members can also be asked to stand to show their agreement for a particular motion. If the result is not obvious, then a count needs to be taken and recorded
- On an occasion where a member is not able to attend the meeting to cast his/her vote, it is possible if the Club's rules provide for it, that s/he appoint another person to vote on his/her behalf. This is referred to as 'voting by proxy'

D. Planning for the Meeting

For a meeting to run smoothly there are a number of things that need to be planned and organised before the day of the meeting.

1. The Agenda:

- An agenda is a list of the things that will be discussed at the meeting
- The agenda shows who will speak about each item and sometimes even how long it may take to talk about each item
- People who will attend need to have the agenda before the meeting so that they know what will be discussed
- Some important items will come up at every meeting and will be included on each agenda

- At the beginning of the meeting each agenda item should be referred to and some explanation given if necessary
- At the end of the agenda, there is usually a section for 'General Business'. This is usually a time for each person to raise issues or talk about things that are not on the list already
- Beside each agenda item, there should be some words to explain whether it needs a decision, some discussion, to be planned or to be given to someone as a task
- Invitations or notice of the meeting need to be sent out to those people who will be attending the meeting. The invitation should include an agenda

2. Practical Things:

- Will everyone at the meeting be able to see each other?
- Are there enough chairs?
- People will prefer to have some personal space; is there somewhere to put papers etc?
- Will a circle or square be the best arrangement?
- Water, tea, coffee and/or biscuits available during the meeting
- Make sure that all necessary information papers are available for people at the meeting
- Are there pens and paper if they are needed during the meeting?
- Make sure there is adequate heat and ventilation.

E. Common Challenges

The role of the chairperson is an important one. There will be times when others may not agree with the decisions made by the chairperson or the way that the meeting is conducted. It is important that rules/guidelines for the group be written and that they are reviewed. Listed below are a number of 'problem' areas that may occur.

1. Meetings are too long

- Make sure that people know when the meeting will end. Planned social time at the end of the meeting may help
- Reduce the number of items on the agenda
- Think of different ways to discuss the agenda items
- Use positive language and tone of voice when you are trying to speed the group up
- Plan a tea break in the middle of the meeting
- Get feedback from others in the group about how assertive and appropriate you are
- Get the group to think about the ground rules

2. People are Bored

- Have a different sort of meeting occasionally e.g. Drop the long agenda and focus on one issue
- Maybe arrange a semi-formal occasion; one in which people will have the opportunity to find out more about each other
- Invite a 'guest speaker' – arrange to have a shorter meeting before/after the speaker
- Hold a review or 'reflection' session to look back at the progress and achievements and to plan for the future

3. Someone is talking too much

- You need to take action, as others will often become bored. They may feel that their presence is not needed, as they do not have an opportunity to input their ideas
- The gentle approach is best and often body language or non-verbal signs can be effective. Take opportunities to acknowledge what this person has said and then ask others for their opinions
- There are occasions when all efforts will be in vain and then the ground rules may be revisited and the point clearly made

4. *Some People Don't Speak at All!*

- If they feel safe and comfortable they are more likely to express their ideas and opinions
- Ask non-threatening, direct questions to those who are silent or less keen to speak
- One ground rule might be that everyone in the meetings is respected and that no personal attacks or ridicule of ideas will be accepted
- Having a time to review the reasons for people attending the meetings often allows people to move away if it is not meeting their needs

5. *When Members Argue*

- It is important that the chairperson has a sound knowledge of the issues around conflict and how to manage it
- Conflict is not always negative and if managed correctly can be a positive force in sound decision making
- There are some areas that are more difficult than others and must be handled quickly and competently. Personal attacks or disrespect for a particular person or their ideas is not acceptable
- It is not the role of the chairperson to 'take sides' but to remain neutral and manage the discussion
- Often the issue is one that is based on events outside of the Club or meeting and should therefore be resolved at some other time
- Taking time away from the discussion is often helpful

6. *Conflict of Interest*

A conflict of interest occurs when you or someone close to you (e.g. family, partner and/or friends) may have an interest in, or potential to benefit from, an event or a decision that you will be contributing to, as a member of the management committee. A conflict of interest may occur in situations where you or someone close to you (family and/or friends) might expect to receive or benefit by way of a favour or information that comes to you because of your role as a member of the committee.

Often in small communities it is possible that committee members will know about people or issues to be discussed. It is then up to the individual to decide if it could be seen as a conflict of interest. It is also important that if there is doubt one should clarify concerns with the committee. If you believe that a conflict of interest will emerge or is likely to be seen to emerge then it your responsibility to withdraw from any business or discussion carried on regarding that issue. It is always best to act on the side of caution.

There are several options open to you, if this occurs.

- Acknowledge your conflict at the beginning of the discussion with as much or as little detail as you feel comfortable
- It is vital that this be done as early in the discussion as possible so that there can be no accusations made
- Ask that your actions be recorded in the minutes
- Leave the room or area in which the discussion is being held, asking that you be informed when the time is right for you to return
- When you return to the room and the discussion, ask that it be noted in the minutes

F. Good Communication

Clear communication is one of the essential requirements for groups to work well together. Misunderstandings between members of the committee, paid staff and those who provide funds to the Club or members of the public are common and normal but if not made clear can lead to further difficulties.

When there are decisions to be made of a legal nature, it is important that understanding is clear. Time and effort is needed to ensure that misunderstandings do not occur. Listed below are some ideas that will assist in doing this effectively.

They are to:

- Actively listen
- Evaluate
- Negotiate

- Accommodate

1. You actively listen by:

- Checking that what you think you heard is what the other person is saying - *'I heard you say that you wanted to change the time of the next meeting. Is that right or did you mean the time of all the meetings?'*
- Being prepared to say - *'I am not sure that I understand that. Would you tell me again please?'*
- Not judging but listening with empathy and trying to understand - *'That must have been difficult for you. Tell me again what you would like us to do'*
- If there are facts involved, being sure that you both agree what they are - *'So the total cost was €350 and that includes all extras. Is that correct?'*
- By not responding to the 'mood' or the way the message is given but to the content - *'You are angry about what happened. We will return the equipment and get a refund'*

2. You can evaluate by stopping, considering and reflecting:

- Not responding quickly with expressions of anger, humour, amazement or shock – wait and listen for what comes next
- Listening to the whole message first and work out what it is that the other person is asking
- Asking a question rather than thinking you already know what is meant - *'Are you saying that you think we should look for somewhere else to have our meetings?'*
- Avoid coming to a decision too quickly

3. You can negotiate by:

- Being clear about our own opinion and how we feel - *'I am interested in your opinion but I still believe that we should look for somewhere else'*
- Asking *'how important is it?'* when being asked to compromise
- Allowing the opinion of another person

- Taking time to consider appropriate alternatives for both people

4. You can check and clarify by:

- Finding different ways to explain how things are done
- Find several ways to explain/describe the reasons and results of the decisions that have been made
- Keeping all materials as 'user friendly' as possible e.g. Simple language; clear guidelines
- Offering further explanation if some people need it

G. Minute by Minute

- Listen!
- Make sure that everyone has an equal chance to have a say
- Check that everyone understands what is said
- Summarise the information when necessary
- Keep the meeting moving – if something is taking a long time check with the group about this
- If conflict arises try to ensure that everyone has a chance to say or express what he or she feels – encourage everyone to listen
- Ask people to stick to certain guidelines e.g. Ask people to use simple language
- Ask people to speak one at a time

1. Opening the Meeting

- Make sure people know each other
- Be welcoming – if you are not able to welcome everyone maybe another member of the committee could do it for you
- Start the meeting by saying what it is that you would like to discuss during the meeting (Go through the Agenda). Talk about the importance of each item and how long the discussion might take

- Ask each person at the meeting to help to keep it on time
- Ask for any other things that people might want to put on the agenda (General Business)
- Agree on the roles of members in the meeting. Minute taker, timekeeper, chairperson etc
- If there are people coming late, welcome them and give them a summary of what has been discussed and where you are up to

2. During the Meeting

- Move to each agenda item in turn. It will be confusing if the discussion moves off the issue that is to be dealt with
- Remind people what the committee is being asked to do for each agenda item. E.g. make a decision, discuss, and be informed
- Outline how the discussions will be held and remind people how long it will take

3. Making Decisions

- The chairperson's role is to make the issue as clear as possible – not to 'take sides'
- Give any necessary background information, or the reason why the decisions need to be made
- Each person should be given an opportunity to have his or her say on each point
- Make sure that everyone has enough information
- Summarize the discussion before a final decision is called for
- Clarify how the decision will be made e.g. voting, or the decision to be made by one person after the meeting etc
- For important decisions, 'thinking time' between meetings can sometimes be useful – it is important to be clear about when the decision will be made and whether any work needs to be done between meetings and who will do it

- At the end of each agenda item, make sure that if decisions are made, the results are clear. If action is needed say who is going to do it and make sure that all of this is clearly written down and agreed upon. For important decisions ask the minute-taker to read out the relevant section in the minutes for the groups' agreement
- At the end of the meeting try not to take on too much 'other business'
- Remind people of any social arrangements
- Always thank the members of the group for their time and participation
- Always end the meeting on a positive note, encouraging people to continue the valuable work

4. *After the Meeting*

- Evaluate the meeting – preferably with someone who was there – use this to help you plan the next meeting
- Check with people about how they are 'feeling' after the meeting

H. Jargon

The words 'motion' and 'resolution' are used often in the context of meetings. They have quite different meanings.

- A 'motion' is the term used for the proposal or idea that has been put forward
- A 'motion' may be discussed, clarified, reformed or reworded
- A 'motion' is voted on by the group and may be accepted or defeated. If defeated it never moves to the next stage of becoming a 'resolution' of the group
- A 'resolution' is a 'motion' that has been accepted or approved of by the group or management committee
- A 'motion' that becomes a 'resolution' is a decision that is binding for the Club