



NEIGHBORHOOD ACADEMY

Facilitating meetings involves paying attention to a variety of things, sometimes several at once — from subject matters to people issues, seating arrangements to how much time is left. Apply the advice below to run meetings that are not only productive and efficient but even enjoyable.

STAYING ON TRACK: Achieving Tasks

• **Open and Close Assertively**

- Use a strong, clear voice to declare meetings have begun or ended.
- If for no other reason, call on respect for one another's time to begin or end.
- Opening: show enthusiasm for the work to be done.
- Closing: Thank attendees for the meeting's achievements and restate next steps.

• **Make Clear Transitions**

- As soon as the goal of an agenda item is met, restate the outcome and have it recorded in detail in the minutes.
- If energy remains to continue discussing an agenda item, state when and where that is appropriate (e.g. after the meeting, at a committee meeting, next month's meeting, etc.).
- Make sure everyone knows what's being discussed and what's being decided at every stage of the meeting.
- Firmly introduce the next agenda item.

• **Negotiate Time Investment**

- Sprinkle in comments about how much time is left for an agenda item.
- Express your desire to save time for other important agenda items.
- Restate the objective for an agenda item and how much time you're giving to reach it, renegotiating as needed.

• **Focus Conversations**

- When discussions slide off topic, observe this aloud and state the need to return to the objective.
- Connect digressions back into the agenda item.
- Suggest how that conversation might continue elsewhere (i.e. later in the meeting, at a committee meeting, offline, etc.).

• **Ask for Commitment**

- Ask for public, verbal commitment to achieving action items, starting with yourself.
- Lead by example – declare your own commitments and express satisfaction with what you achieve.
- Express appreciation for those who rise to the call.
- Call on people you think could also help.

- **Celebrate Effort as Well as Success**
 - Praise members for what you want to see more of from the group.
 - Build in time for celebrating success -- feeling the reward of everyone's efforts inspires doing even more.

TRUST BUILDING: Foster Belonging and Participation

- **Establish Ground Rules**
 - Have your executive committee adopt, practice, and role model ground rules, then introduce them to committees and the regular meeting for adoption.
 - It is every member's responsibility to both be accountable and hold each other accountable to ground rules.
 - Be prepared to interject during an agenda item to address a ground rule being broken – it will be worth it!
- **Ask, Listen and Reflect Back**
 - Attentive listening is perhaps the most important skill for neighborhood leadership.
 - Ask questions not only to gather information but to give people the floor and to feel included.
 - Show people they've been heard by paraphrasing what you understand they mean or express what it means to you.
- **Establish Routines**
 - Increase meeting attendance by establishing a consistent time and place.
 - Prepare a communication strategy to inform participants of any deviation from meeting norms.
 - Starting on time, every time supports regular attendance and respects members' time.
 - The quality of how regular meetings are conducted will cascade across the entire association.
- **Be Transparent**
 - Express the rationale behind decision making, especially those made by committees; not doing this breaks down trust rapidly.
 - Express how dissenting opinions and minority votes were considered and, if appropriate, incorporated into the final decision.
 - Each of us have beliefs and life experiences that influence what we see and hear in meetings. Strive to be aware of the lens you bring to issues, especially ones you personally care about. Sharing this builds trust in your leadership.
 - Your opinions are important, too -- when chairing a meeting, it helps to distinguish expressing your personal thought from your role as facilitator.
 - If you're leading a meeting that you cannot be objective about, consider having someone else facilitate.

- **Be Inclusive**
 - Inclusion fosters trust; trust encourages participation and inclusion.
 - Diverse neighborhoods may be more challenging to cohere but stronger when they do.
 - Stay curious about who is not at the table, what that means, and how to invite them in.
 - Encourage subgroups to find their own voice and advocate their own interest.
 - Be aware of factors such as holidays, needs, and stressors when setting meeting dates and times, including when to cancel or postpone.
- **Address Confusion**
 - Recap the history and context of an issue or decision to bring folks up to speed.
 - Inform people where to go to learn or access resources about complex or contentious topics.
 - Ensure meeting minutes accurately reflect member contributions.
 - Summarize the results of decisions, the rationales behind them and consequences expected to follow. Repeat as often as needed.
- **Recognize People and Effort**
 - Show people they are seen for who they are and the gifts they bring.
 - Recognize people for their effort as much as the outcomes they helped generate.
 - Give credit to minority voices and dissenters for revealing multiple sides of an issue, helping shape the final outcome of a project, or even just vocalizing themselves.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: Work With Dissent, not Against it

- **First, Know Yourself and Find Support**
 - Understanding your own experience with and habits towards conflict is the first and most important step towards effectively managing conflict.
 - Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument and Style Matters Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory are high quality self-assessment tools. Other cost-free resources may be found as well.
 - If you find a specific conflict difficult to manage, find an ally who is willing to help you facilitate or participate in tense meetings.
 - When preparing for difficult meetings, make sure to take care of yourself by doing calming activities, eating beforehand, hydrating, avoiding overthinking, etc.
 - Consider asking someone who knows you well but does not know the people involved or have a stake in the issues to reflect, identify patterns, imagine solutions, and support your role in finding positive outcomes.

- **Diversity and Dissent = Challenge and Potential**

- Lead groups of diverse people through promoting mutual understanding, advocating for all interests to be heard, and learning the art of “saving face.”
- Recognize and soften your own biases for or against categories of people.
- Be curious if certain kinds of members do not attend meetings, and especially if they once attended and decided to stop. Consider reaching out to them.
- Emphasize common ground when and where it is found.

- **Use Informal/Offline Channels**

- Invite people to talk with you outside of regular meetings about heated issues.
- Offer holding private conversations in confidence to help people share more honestly and get to the root of the matter. If there’s anything you are not willing or able to hold in confidence, say so at the start.
- State your intentions at the start of private meetings increases trust, reduces suspicion, and lets them help meet your goals in talking with them.
- Hold true to your own personal boundaries. For example, you don’t need to allow anyone to yell at you. It’s your right to end the conversation if needed.
- If a meeting ends unresolved, consider who else you might talk with to help deescalate the issue at hand. Be sure to uphold your end of maintaining confidentiality.
- Ask for permission to bring up offline conversations in group meetings. Provide opportunities for them to speak for themselves.

- **Side Talk: Disruptive Into Constructive**

- Meeting time is very value – you need to protect it from splitting people’s attention. Most of the time, stating aloud that you notice side talk going on and asking people to refocus on the topic at hand is enough.
- A number of people side-talking at once indicates something important is held back from being voiced openly. State that you observe this, then ask if anyone who is side talking would say out loud what they’re thinking. Be prepared to work with a wave of unleashed energy, potential reactions, and new options that weren’t on the table before.
- If there’s a lot of side talk, consider calling for a break. This gives people permission to have critical sidebar conversations or take a breather to gather their own thoughts. It also gives you a chance to begin the meeting again with a fresh start.

- **Handling Outbursts**

- Yelling is not okay. It violates decorum, which is there to make people feel welcome and to encourage participation. This should be reflected in your ground rules.
- Interject when someone tries to shut other people down. Ask them to step out of the room and return when they’re ready to abide by the ground rules or leave the meeting altogether.

- Apologizing is the first step towards restoring trust after someone raises their voice. If they aren’t willing to apologize, they aren’t ready to rejoin the meeting.
- If you are not prepared to talk down an angry community member, identify someone who is and prepare how to respond when that happens.
- Help the group get back on track after an outburst by acknowledging the disruption, describing in respectful terms how you intend to address it offline, and resetting the agenda item.

- **Tied Votes**

- Tied votes can be dealt with in a variety of ways:
 - Restate the motion, name the point of dispute, and give time for more discussion while expressing encouragement and your confidence that a conclusion will be found.
 - Amend the motion to reflect the concerns of minority interests and take a new vote.
 - Table the motion to be picked up again a future meeting and prompt offline discussion in the meantime.
 - Consider the motion failed.
- If a vote is close yet still passes or fails, consider the impact on those for whom it didn’t go their way. Invite them to say a word or two about what this means for them and ensure this is recorded in the minutes for future reference.

BUILDING CONSENSUS: Good Enough to Move Forward

- **Test Your Assumptions**

- No one person can have all the context, pick up on every social cue, or know for certain what everyone thinks and feels in a community meeting. Share with the group what you think is happening and ask for amendments until the group all shares the same understanding.
- When you sense a consensus is forming, test it out and see. Articulate the consensus you see forming, then ask participants to amend it until all key considerations are reflected in it. Have the Secretary record and read consensus statements as many times as needed.

- **Create Ways for People to Voice Themselves**

- When meetings depend on one person talking at a time, there will be people who choose not to speak. This might create an illusion of greater consensus than is truly the case. By creating ways for people to speak up, such as going in a round, everyone has a chance to voice themselves.
- Consider alternative ways of voting or giving input that focus more on surfacing opinions rather than making a decision. Examples include anonymous feedback on strips of paper that are collected and read aloud, or weighted voting in which everyone is given a number of stickers they can use to vote all on one idea or spread out across multiple ideas.
- These techniques are often helpful with large groups of 12 or more people.

- **Respect Dissent**

- When working towards consensus, respectfully name all the concerns against proposed solutions and express how those are being considered in the spirit of goodwill.
- Genuinely invite people to vocalize dissenting options rather than avoiding or minimizing them. Addressing these concerns directly will increase the likelihood of reaching consensus much faster than bypassing or avoiding them.
- If allowed in your bylaws, remind members they have the option to block a motion. This means that even if everyone else agrees to a way forward, the person blocking has indicated they cannot settle with that outcome and will prevent it from happening. Remind the group if anyone chooses to use it that they are responsible for explaining their concerns and addressing the interests of those in favor of the solution. Discussion may continue to persuade the hold to be removed, but it cannot be overridden.

- **Attend to Both Task and Process**

- Notice whether you tend to pay more attention to the substance of agenda items or attending to the group process of accomplishing them. Consider what might change by focusing on both.
- When the group is communicating well but still stuck, bring closer attention to the issue and work on sorting out the details. There may be a problem that hasn't been discovered yet and needs to be untangled or resolved.
- When the group has sufficient information but cannot agree to a conclusion, get curious about how people are communicating with one another. The obstacle may be more a matter of the issue's impact on people or concerns with proposed solutions rather than agreeing to a common set of facts.

- **Seek Alternatives and Compromises**

- Find new options when people are stuck or fixated on present options by first ensuring that all essential information has been shared, followed by time for questions. Next, ask people to pose alternatives, tradeoffs, or rank items they are more willing to shift positions on. Finally, negotiate from a point of large concessions down to smaller ones to a point that all parties can agree to move forward.
- A true compromise will leave each party slightly dissatisfied. This should be anticipated and approached with courage and understanding when parties feel like they have lost a position.
- Consider asking relatively neutral parties to pose compromises rather than those with a heavy stake in the issue.
- Consider having another officer facilitate agenda items in which you have a significant stake.

- **Assert the Conclusion**

- Firmly stating in clear and unambiguous terms the conclusion of an issue brings an essential feeling of closure and the beginning of a new way forward.
- Bringing closure makes it easier to initiate new business and clears the path for addressing closely related issues.
- Resolving a difficult issue should not be a matter of gloating or even celebrating. Rather, it's a moment to begin resting nerves, reconciling differences, settling losses, and moving forward. A solidly stated conclusion allows this process to begin.

