

Human Resources Tools

Tips on  
Leading and Contributing to Meetings



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**All booklets in the HR Tools Series are available online in the Information Section of CCCO's website at [www.workinculture.ca](http://www.workinculture.ca)**

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# Introduction

It's a bit of a cliché. Say the word "meeting" in any work environment – cultural or corporate – and you'll often hear sighs or groans about wasted time. But any group work effort requires people to come together frequently over a period of time. Whether in a small cultural organization, where perhaps only two or three people attend a half-hour meeting to discuss one agenda item, or in a larger organization, where there may be many participants at a meeting with multiple presenters, meetings can be an effective way of sharing information and reaching decisions. They can also be a huge waste of time with no particular benefit.

Cultural employees are frequent multi-taskers, stretched in different directions in often under-resourced organizations. Their time is valuable and costly. As a cultural manager who plans and runs meetings, you need to ask yourself whether the amount of preparation involved and the outcomes achieved have been worth the time invested by you and the participants.

As cultural managers, you're always busy planning, preparing for and running meetings with your own staff, with other members of the organization or the sector, or simply contributing to other people's meetings.

This guide looks at your role as a meeting leader and as a meeting participant.

In ***Leading Meetings*** we examine how to plan and conduct meetings effectively: defining your desired outcome, preparing for the meeting, making discussions constructive, handling interruptions and conflict, and generating ideas. This section also considers the role of an independent facilitator.

In ***Contributing to Meetings*** we consider how to participate effectively in meetings that you're not running: the importance of listening and getting your point across successfully.

# LEADING MEETINGS

## A Focus on Results

### **MEETING BENEFITS**

Meetings are an important means of communicating.

- ▶ You can ensure that everyone gets the same message at the same time.
- ▶ You can check everyone's understanding of the information immediately.
- ▶ You can assess reactions.
- ▶ You can try to resolve any queries immediately.
- ▶ You can resolve problems or make decisions as a group.
- ▶ You can build team identity and team effort.

### **PLANNING FOR RESULTS**

First ask yourself whether a meeting is really necessary or whether there's a better way to get the same result.

If you conclude that a meeting is indeed necessary, consider whether a meeting alone is sufficient. Are there other ways to inform the discussion in order to ensure a successful outcome?

- ▶ pre-meeting collection/analysis of information
- ▶ pre-meeting conversations
- ▶ handouts (guidance notes, checklists, reviews, exhibition results, etc.)

Then define what it is that you're trying to achieve by holding a meeting

### **Be clear on the purpose of the meeting**

The following page provides a list of meeting goals. If the meeting agenda contains several different items, you should use the same list to define the desired outcome of each item.

Meetings may be held for one or more of the following reasons:

- communicating information or news
- getting information or opinions
- generating ideas or exploring new approaches
- persuading people to accept or act on a course of action
- problem-solving or decision-making
- providing instruction

Perhaps you want to share news about the results of recent-fundraising activity or grant results, or you need feedback on why attendance at a gallery opening was less than anticipated. Maybe you want to brainstorm on how to handle negative comments in the press after a book launch or you need ideas for finding new volunteers for an annual festival.

## **Point-Counterpoint**

### **ON ONE HAND...**

Some cultural managers hold regularly scheduled staff meetings either within each functional group or for all members of the organization. These may be held weekly, possibly on the same morning each week, with the intention of simply discussing any issues or concerns that have emerged over the previous week.

Often the practice is established because the manager feels that it's somehow "a good idea for everyone to communicate." With no clear purpose for the meeting, participants and leader lose valuable work time because of the commitment to attend routine discussions that may be of little or no use.

In many cases it's much more effective to hold meetings only when specific trigger events show them to be necessary.

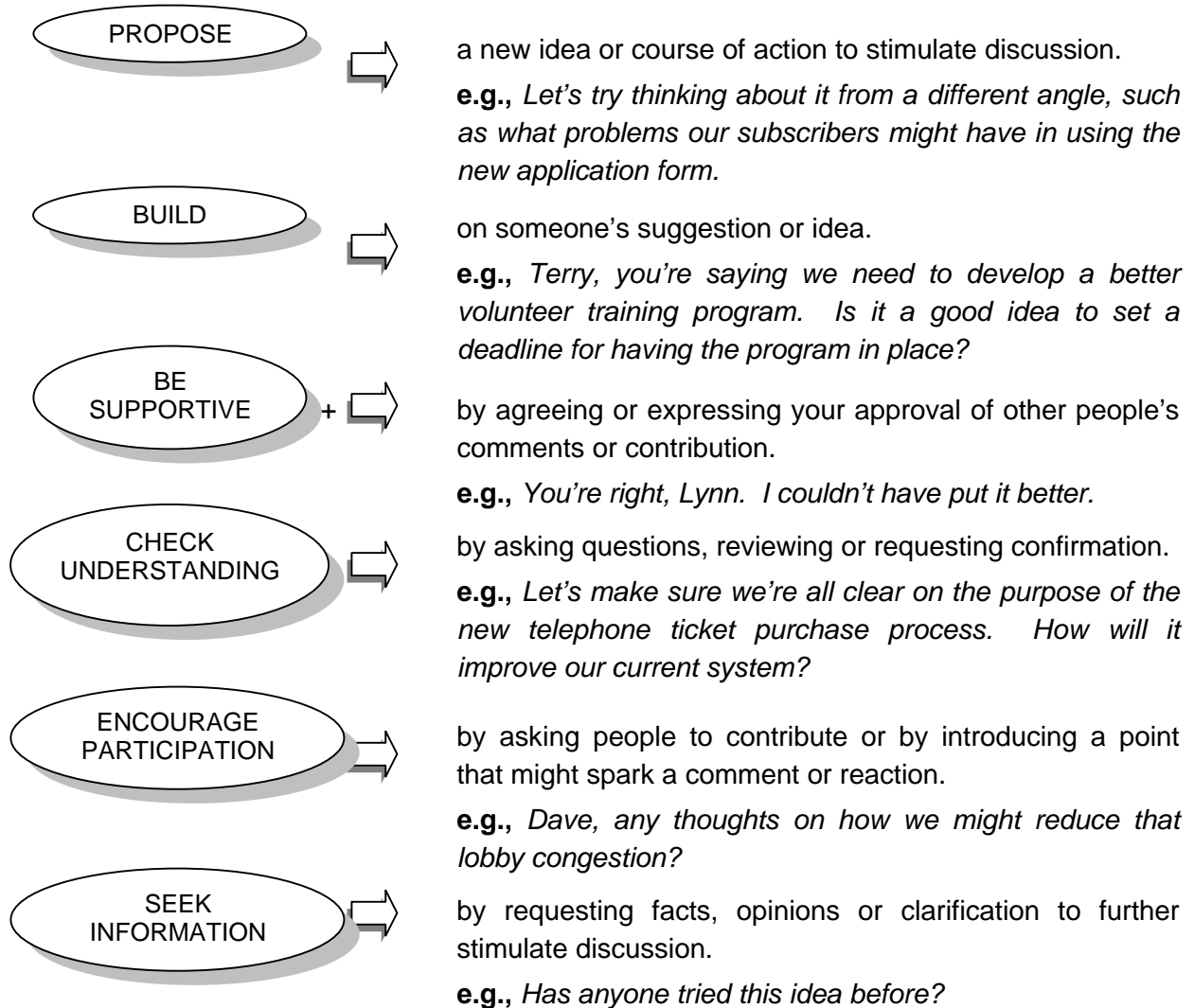
### **ON THE OTHER HAND...**

If an arts organization has just two or three full-time employees, each of whom has a distinct area of responsibility, but also contracts staff that come and go, work from home, or work on specific projects, sometimes "the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing." Regular staff meetings can ensure communication so that issues of concern, whether big or small, don't fall between the cracks.

# Making Discussions Constructive

Whatever your goals are, keep the atmosphere congenial and keep the meeting moving. If the aim is to get information, solve a problem or reach a decision, encourage discussion in an open, constructive manner.

Here are some ideas that will help you.

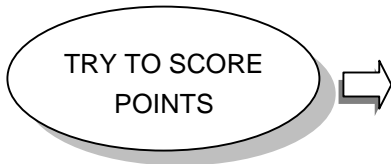


**But be careful. Some comments can have the opposite effect. You can discourage discussion or divert it from your goals if do any of the following:**



by ignoring them or implying that their contribution is of little value.

**e.g.**, Chris, I have to interrupt there because I don't agree with you.



by implying that they are wrong and you are right.

**e.g.**, Joan, I don't think you really get what I'm saying.



# Additional Tips for Running Effective Meetings

## **PARTICIPATION**

Think carefully about who needs to attend the meeting and include only those whose participation you require or who will benefit in a concrete way from being present (e.g., a new employee who is getting familiar with company or department operations). Including unnecessary people wastes their time. Of course, there will be occasions when individuals need to be included for “political” reasons.

## **GROUND RULES**

It may be important to agree on ground rules, especially if members are already polarized around issues, such as management processes or promotional matters.

Ground rules are the working standards that determine how participants will conduct discussions and make decisions.

Typically, ground rules, which take the form of agreements on certain topics, centre on these issues:

- ▶ the purpose of the meetings (what people expect to be achieved by the end)
- ▶ significant or ambiguous definitions
- ▶ timelines for the meeting – date and length
- ▶ meeting leadership and other roles
- ▶ participation and attendance
- ▶ how decisions will be made (consensus or by vote)
- ▶ the value of expressing different perspectives, how disagreements should be expressed and handled
- ▶ communication with people or groups outside the meeting

As the meeting leader, you can offer one or two ground rules to stimulate discussion or suggest thinking about ground rules that participants have overlooked. However, all participants need to agree on them if they are to have any credibility for the group.

## **VISUAL AIDS**

Flip charts or an equivalent tool are very useful in all but the simplest and briefest of meetings.

You can use them to

- ▶ create an ongoing record of the meeting progress so that participants can see the notes and make corrections or ask for clarification during the meeting
- ▶ organize thinking, i.e., draft wording, suggest options, connect ideas, depict consequences, narrow choices, summarize decisions, organize tasks
- ▶ keep participants on track by referring back to the topic on the chart or to specific agenda items

Keep the information on the charts "user friendly." Use large letters, space between concepts (where ideas can be added), and alternating colours. For flip charts, make sure they have detachable pages that can be posted on any visible surface.

### **“PARKING LOT” ISSUES**

A useful tool for moving participants through the agenda is to create a separate flip chart page for issues raised that are important, but either tangential or too complex to deal with during the meeting. Noting these issues on a separate sheet, often referred to as the "parking lot," respects concerns and assures participants that their issues will be addressed. (Make sure you do address them eventually or else ensure that participants no longer want to address them. Otherwise the “parking lot” list will simply be viewed as a way to avoid dealing with the issue.)

### **TIME MANAGEMENT**

Meetings are notorious for eating up people's time. Here are some ways of ensuring that they do not.

- ▶ Start on time.
- ▶ Don't recap when someone arrives late. It sends the message that being late is acceptable and wastes the valuable time of those who were punctual.
- ▶ State the finish time and don't run over unless everyone agrees that it's OK.
- ▶ Arrange your agenda in order of importance so that you won't omit or skimp on important items if you have to rush items at the end.
- ▶ Finish the meeting early if you have achieved everything you need to.

### **IDENTIFYING NEXT STEPS**

It's very important to take about 10 minutes at the end of the meeting to ask, "Where do we go from here?" or "What do we need to do so that we can move forward with...?"

When decisions are reached, make sure to devote enough time to clarifying how they will be implemented. Very often, when some exciting or problem-solving decision has

been reached, euphoria sets in, and participants fail to convert the decision into an action plan. So before ending the meeting, pin down action steps and summarize who will do what by when.

### **TAKING AND ISSUING MINUTES**

Minutes provide a written record of the decisions taken and the actions agreed upon in a meeting. They serve as a review document that allows performance to be measured. They are a constant reminder of the delivery and non-delivery by individuals of agreed-upon actions. Sometimes, as we dash off to the next meeting, we lose track of what we had volunteered to do and by when.

The style of minutes depends on the circumstances of the meeting. In situations where a record is critical, you may need to take detailed minutes. Otherwise, you can create a simple list of decisions made and actions to be taken (with the person/people responsible identified). Generally, minutes should be as short as possible, as long as all key information is shown. This makes them quick and easy to prepare and digest.

It's always impressive if the meeting leader issues minutes within 24 hours of the end of the meeting. It's even better if they're issued on the same day.

### **CASE STUDY**

**SORRY THESE MINUTES ARE SO LATE!** A regional arts network had a generous soul who volunteered to chair monthly meetings and take minutes. These, along with the timeline and agenda of the next meeting, were usually emailed to members about five days prior to the next meeting, too late for some people to be reminded of the tasks they were expected to complete in the meantime and too late for others to be able to schedule time off to attend.

### **EVALUATION**

Finally, although self-reflection is difficult, you and your participants need to review honestly how the group is performing. So encourage everyone to assess meetings either verbally or in writing. Ask questions such as "What aspect of the meeting did you particularly like?" "What didn't go well?" or "What would you do differently next time?" In written evaluations, include a section for "suggestions". And, especially during verbal discussions, invite participants to respond with candour by stressing the importance of honesty in ensuring the value and effectiveness of future meetings.

# Generating Ideas

An important goal of meetings can be to generate ideas to tackle a certain issue. A small dance company director wanting to attract more corporate funding is looking for innovative ideas to improve fund-raising events that have grown “stale.” A box-office manager wants ideas on streamlining the ticket sales process to reduce lineups.

People are often reluctant to volunteer ideas. They can't see immediately how to implement them or they're afraid of being criticized for coming up with a “crazy” idea. They don't realize that the “craziest” idea can sometimes start a new line of thinking that solves the problem. The technique below aims to encourage creative thinking and discourage negative thinking. You can run the session as a “free-for-all” or establish a speaking order.

1. Give the group some guidelines to promote spontaneity and good communication.

## DO

- ▶ Call out any idea as soon as it comes to you. Suspend judgment. All ideas are interesting and valuable.
- ▶ Come up with a lot of ideas.
- ▶ Try looking at the problem in different ways.
- ▶ Come up with original or unusual ideas.
- ▶ Give half-formed ideas.
- ▶ Build on other ideas.
- ▶ Have fun.

## DON'T

- ▶ Rehearse what you're going to say.
- ▶ Analyze or evaluate ideas.
- ▶ Think of reasons “why not.”
- ▶ Criticize other people's ideas.
- ▶ Be defensive about your ideas.

2. Set a time limit (usually no more than 15 minutes.) Start the session, then keep up a rapid pace, while recording each idea briefly on a flip chart or other visual aid.
3. Use some kind of signal to gently discourage any negative behaviour.
4. Immediately after the session, review the list of ideas by yourself or with the group and select the best for further consideration.

# Handling Interruptions

In a meeting you may often be faced with interruptions that prevent other participants from fully presenting their views. A person may jump in to dispute facts, criticize a suggestion or make a point over-eagerly.

You have to have to decide quickly whether the interrupter's point is valid or not (i.e., irrelevant to the matter under discussion).

1. If it's not, say so and ask the person to hold it back until the appropriate time.
2. If it is, decide whether to deal with it immediately. If you can handle it quickly and briefly, do so. Otherwise, say that you will deal with it after the first individual has finished.

Here are three tips on how to respond.

## **STAY CALM**

React calmly to interruptions – don't allow yourself to be thrown off track and don't show irritation.

## **KEEP TO THE POINT**

Always keep the meeting goals in mind and move towards them – don't get diverted into separate or irrelevant issues.

## **BE FIRM**

If the original speaker was contributing to your meeting goals, ensure that that person gets a full hearing. Don't let another member over-ride the original speaker.

The basic message is "be professional". When leading meetings, use your authority to ensure that all participants are allowed to add their value to the meeting and to get their points across.

# Engaging a Facilitator

An increasing trend in many work sectors is to bring in an independent facilitator or to appoint someone internally to manage critically important meetings. Facilitation may look easy, but appearances can be deceptive. It takes hard work to make it look relaxed and straightforward. Professional facilitators have refined their skills over time through training courses, practice and a lot of experience,

If you are engaging an external facilitator to help with an important meeting, it's essential that you work closely with that person to plan and lead the meeting. As the manager, you retain the authority of leader and provide grounding in the realities of your cultural organization and the cultural sector within which you work. The facilitator has process expertise, serves to balance participation and is better situated to move the group through sensitive issues, controversy and tough problems. Separating the titular leadership role from the meeting leadership function can significantly improve the effectiveness of the meeting in three ways.

1. By taking care of process concerns, the facilitator can free you to provide valuable input as a meeting participant.
2. By operating on principles of objectivity, the skilled facilitator ensures equal participation and decisions that reflect joint thinking. Ideas from more forceful participants are tempered by the facilitator's probing questions, and if their ideas are adopted, it's because others view them as valuable.
3. By understanding group process and decision-making, the professional facilitator can guide the group through complex information and controversial positions.

In many cases however – the most common being lack of funds in cash-strapped cultural organizations – it's not practical to hire a professional facilitator, and a trained internal facilitator is unavailable. In these situations, you, as the meeting leader, will have to facilitate the meeting. You, too, can serve the group well by following some guidelines.

1. Help the group improve the way it solves problems and makes decisions.
2. Ensure that the group accomplishes its identified outcomes in a timely manner.
3. Foster within the group an enhanced sense of commitment to one another and to the achievement of goals.
4. See that group members share and understand all information relevant to an issue, and seek new information when necessary.
5. Protect the group from internal and/or external manipulation or coercion.

Comprehensive training in facilitation skills is beyond the scope of this guide. But when you are required to facilitate a session or when you are evaluating the effectiveness of a professional facilitator whom you have engaged, you should focus on three main areas:

### **1. Analysis**

- separation of content work from process work
- identification of interests
- framing of problems

### **2. Communication**

- choosing words
- listening, summarizing and reframing
- using questions to stimulate thinking

### **3. Familiarity with process models**

- leadership
- decision-making and consensus building
- techniques to keep the meeting on track and moving

## *Contributing to Meetings*

### Participating Effectively

Here are tips on how to participate effectively at meetings that you're attending but not running.

- ▶ Accept a share of the responsibility for making the meeting work.
- ▶ Approach each meeting in the right frame of mind:
  - wanting to benefit
  - wanting to contribute
- ▶ Check that you're clear about meeting aims.
- ▶ Keep those aims in mind throughout and keep moving towards them (avoid getting off the point or introducing diversions).
- ▶ Always seek constructive outcomes (how to apply suggestions, rather than offer reasons why they won't work).
- ▶ Be honest. Don't distort or cushion your points to say what (you think) other participants want to hear.
- ▶ Co-operate with others in building and exploring ideas and practices.
- ▶ Give feedback to the leader on the value and progress of the meeting.



# Listening Skills

Meetings are full of two-way communications. As well as making points yourself, you need to listen carefully when someone else is speaking.

Listening well is a real skill. Here are some tips.

- ▶ Don't interrupt. It can understandably annoy the other person if you don't allow the individual to finish speaking. If an important point occurs to you, quickly make a note of it on a piece of paper, then raise it when the person has concluded.
- ▶ Concentrate on listening while someone else is speaking. Don't keep rehearsing what you want to say next. If you're busy thinking about your next point, you'll miss what they say.
- ▶ Hear what they say. It's a common mistake to only "half-listen," hearing what you want to hear rather than what is actually being said.
- ▶ Maintain eye contact frequently while the person is speaking to show that you are listening.
- ▶ Encourage someone to continue talking if you want the person to explain a point or add to it. You can do this simply with a nod, a word of agreement or a question like "Why?" or "Can you explain?" or "Tell me more."

There's a cartoon that features two people sitting on a park bench. The woman is saying to the man "I'd let you talk more but you're not as interesting as me." It's an amusing reminder of how people feel when they're in a meeting where they "can't get a word in edgewise."

Watch out, too, for the person who asks a question, then continues to talk, leaving the person to whom the question was directed to either "lose track" of what the question was or to feel shut out.

# Getting Your Point Across

## **PRESENTING YOUR CASE**

When you want to make an important point in a meeting – a point that you feel strongly about and which you feel really adds value – think of approaching it as a “mini-presentation.”

Here are some key ideas to remember when speaking.

### **CLEAR STATEMENT**

State your viewpoint clearly.

### **COMPELLING FACTS**

Use a small number of hard facts (or benefits if you are trying to “sell” a proposition) to support your case, expressed in terms that will make the most impact on your audience.

### **LOGICAL AND SHORT PRESENTATION**

Use the best sequence of points to attract and hold attention. The shorter you make your case, the better (provided that there are no gaps in it). If you talk for more than three minutes it will be harder to hold attention.

### **CONFIDENT DEMEANOUR**

Know your case well and believe in it. Your uncertainty or lack of commitment will be communicated to the group, who may then reject your proposition.

### **COMMANDING PRESENCE**

Speak clearly, vary the pitch and pace of your voice as comfortably as you can while emphasizing essential points and maintaining eye contact with the group.

## Summary

Meetings can be an extremely effective way of tapping into the ideas of several people at one time and reaching decisions. They can also be a waste of time. So when you invest time in a meeting, you should expect a large enough payback to justify the investment.

There is an additional ingredient that cannot come from a set of guidelines: a mindset that believes in the wisdom of the participants and the value of their views, that demonstrates patience and more patience, and that conveys a non-judgmental demeanour.

In general, a good meeting leader is supportive, respectful and has enough extra energy to carry a group through a late afternoon slump. These aren't quickly acquired skills, but with experience you can make the meetings that you manage a stimulating and productive event for both the participants and your organization.

### NOTE

Many books and articles have been written on the topic of running effective meetings. If you wish to explore the topic beyond what is in this guide, *Appendix I* provides a selection of books on the subject.

Following is a selection of popular books on the topic of meetings in the workplace:

**“Meeting Excellence: 33 Tools to Lead Meetings That Get Results”**

*Authors: Glenn M. Parker and Robert Hoffman (ISBN 0787982814)*

**“The Manager’s Guide to Effective Meetings”**

*Author: Barbara Streibel (ISBN 0071391347)*

**“First Aid for Meetings: Quick Fixes and Major Repairs for Running Effective Meetings”**

*Author: Charlie Hawkins (ISBN 1885221612)*

**“Running a Meeting That Works”**

*Authors: Robert F. Miller and Marilyn Pincus (ISBN 0764124501)*

**“Great Meetings! Great Results!”**

*Authors: Dee Kelsey, Pam Plumb and Beth Braganca (ISBN 0965835413)*