



## Tip Sheet 1

### *Building the Foundation for Effective Meetings*

Many meetings fail because there is no foundation (ground work) laid before the first meeting is called to order. This tip sheet explains how to construct a foundation for effective meetings. Constructing this foundation will maximize your group's effectiveness and will prevent or reduce the likelihood of dysfunctions.

The foundation for effective meetings consists of three main components:

1. A clear and compelling sense of purpose
2. Effective meeting participants
3. Logical rules of interaction for meetings

#### **1. A clear and compelling sense of purpose**

The first component of the foundation for effective meetings is a clear and compelling sense of purpose. With it, the group will be focused on substantive matters, will be able to measure its progress, and will be less likely to be distracted by minutiae. To establish a clear and compelling sense of purpose, you need to ask the following questions:

- Why does the group exist and what is it supposed to achieve?
- Which community or stakeholders does the group serve?
- What specific outcomes are expected of the group?
- What is the desired schedule of expected outcomes?

You will find the answers to the above questions in your group's governing documents (e.g., constitution, bylaws, charge, or other relevant documents). The applicable document may not be as specific or as clear as needed, and this should leave your group with some discretion and flexibility.

Having answered the above questions, you need to establish a work plan to achieve your group's mandate. The work plan should include specific goals and a completion schedule.

The next step is for you, as the group leader, to communicate the group's mandate and proposed work plan to your members and seek their input and commitment. The work plan should then be used to guide the work of the group and its meetings. To reinforce the work plan, consider the following:

- Link meeting agenda items to the group's mandate and work plan
- Read the group's mandate aloud at the start of every meeting
- Review progress on the work plan at every meeting
- Question comments or proposed agenda items that do not appear to be linked to the group mandate and/or work plan

#### **2. Effective participants**

The second component of the meeting foundation is effective participants. Effective participants have positive and well-focused discussions, and complete follow-up duties after meetings. You can build effective participants in three stages.

##### **STAGE ONE: SELECTION PROCESS**

Members should be chosen on the basis of:

- Knowledge/experience relevant to the work of the group
- Desired skills (writing, analysis, communications, etc.)
- Commitment level and availability
- Ability to work as constructive and active members of a team

As the group's leader, you may not always be the one who chooses the group members.

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In such a case, you can try your best to influence the appointing party to select group members with care. You can offer to propose names of specific individuals or a desired profile for the group.

## **STAGE TWO: GROUP ORIENTATION**

Soon after the group is formed, communicate to them about the following:

- Substantive issues (the group's history, mandate, and work plan)
- Process issues (roles, duties, expectations, and rules of interaction)

## **STAGE THREE: PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND REGULAR FEEDBACK**

Your options include:

- Self-evaluation for members (possibly after every meeting)
- Feedback to members from the chair, peer or assigned mentor

You can use the following criteria to evaluate your members:

- Reliable attendance at meetings
- Preparation for meetings and review of pre-circulated material
- Effective completion of follow-up duties between meetings
- Being prepared to share necessary input, even if it may be unpopular
- Supporting other members and helping them succeed
- Openness to feedback and being prepared to share it
- Avoiding domination, rambling, digressions, personal attacks, etc.
- Placing the group's interests ahead of personal or constituency interest
- Respecting confidentiality
- Respecting collective decisions and being prepared to move on

It is a good idea to discuss evaluation options and frequencies with the members before committee work begins.

## **3. Logical Rules of Interaction for Meetings**

The third component of the foundation for effective meetings is establishing agreed-upon rules of interaction. Logical rules of interaction ensure that members will have equal opportunities to speak and understand what behavior is acceptable and what is not. It is a good idea to include a discussion of meeting etiquette/protocol in your orientation process:

Meeting etiquette includes:

- Speaking protocol (e.g., members should get accustomed to raising their hands and waiting to be recognized by the chair. First-time speakers should be recognized ahead of second-time speakers).
- Decorum: members should agree to act in a civilized, respectful, mature, trustworthy and objective manner.
- Avoiding dysfunctional behaviors, such as rambling, domination, cross talk, digressions, lateness, and being distracted by laptops or cell phones.
- Keeping an open mind: listening and learning from discussions
- Serving as active partners in decision-making, speaking up when needed, and making room for others to succeed.

After discussing and obtaining consent regarding these rules of interaction with your members, you can reinforce them using techniques, such as:

- Opening every meeting with a brief reminder of key guidelines
- Having key guidelines (no more than 10), along with the group's mandate, printed on the backs on name tents, facing the participants, as a constant reminder of why they're there, whom they are there to serve, how they are expected to conduct themselves, and what behaviors they should avoid.

### **In closing**

Taking time to build a solid foundation for meetings (communicating a clear and compelling sense of purpose, developing effective participants, and establishing logical rules of interaction), reduces the potential for dysfunction and increases the likelihood of positive outcomes. You are now ready to plan and lead your first meeting.