

# Structuring and running meetings

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## What is the key to a meeting's success?

*Participants know the content and objectives of the meeting, as well as the planned time frames for the individual agenda items, in advance.*

- The individual agenda items are structured and addressed accordingly at the meeting.
- For the main agenda items, methods are applied to facilitate the active participation of all attendees.
- Findings are clearly formulated and set out in the minutes.

## Preparation – important for efficient and stimulating meetings

Create the right conditions to promote active discussions:

- *Correctly assess the level of information of the participants*  
As the chair, you generally have a knowledge advantage. Consider which information needs to be known before the meeting and what you could communicate to the participants before an agenda item is discussed. Don't overburden the participants with too many written documents.
- *Formulate the agenda list precisely*  
Don't only note the topic of an agenda item, but also the objective and the rough intended objective. This will give participants an idea of what it's about and enable them to consider matters in advance.

*So don't do...*

2.	Association excursion
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*Instead do...*

2.	<b>Association excursion:</b> Collecting ideas, deciding on two variants, planning other clarifications	15 mins
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- *Ensure a pleasant atmosphere:*  
Organise a large enough, well-ventilated space with good lighting. Provide something to drink.

## The individual items need a structure

Individual items are addressed in phases:

- Provision of information
- Opinion formation
- Decision-making
- Planning implementation steps

Not every item will go through all phases. It is therefore important to consider which phase each item is in at each meeting. Distinguish between pure information items, items that do not (yet) require any decision to be made and items that do not require implementation planning.

The phases are specified in the agenda list to ensure that those involved know what's going on at the moment.

### Information phase

- **Objective:** All participants have the level of information needed to form an opinion and make a decision on the agenda item.
- **Forms:** Depending on the situation, this information can be provided at the meeting itself, possibly with the help of visual aids, or be provided in advance, with any questions clarified at the meeting.
- **Chair's tasks:** Ensure that all participants feel sufficiently informed. It is recommended to briefly summarise the most important points. It is important to ensure that a discussion does not arise in this phase and is left for the opinion formation phase.
- **Stumbling blocks:** The participants' level of information or ability to quickly absorb lots of information is overestimated. Discussions keep getting out of hand without the chair stepping in.

### Opinion formation phase

- **Objective:** At the end of this phase, it is clear who has which opinion and why. Advantages and disadvantages are discussed and the impacts of decisions are known. Everyone feels like they have been taken seriously.
- **Forms:** Often the opinion formation stage takes place in the form of a discussion during the meeting. In larger committees, this is usually not very efficient. It is important to facilitate conversations in groups of two or small groups, for example, so everyone can express themselves. Creative methods could also be used. Important facts could be noted on a flipchart to make it clear that all arguments have been taken into account.
- **Chair's tasks:** Choose suitable methods and moderate the discussion. The chair encourages participants to express even incomplete and preliminary opinions; opinions may be changed in the course of the discussions. The chair prevents participants from forming an opinion too early with "killer phrases", such as "it's too expensive anyway", "we already tried that years ago." The chair repeats unclear statements: "If I have understood correctly, that means..." It's particularly important to summarise the goings-on at the meeting at various points and at the end, so as to clarify the status of the opinion formation stage.

- **Stumbling blocks:** Only preconceived opinions are given and there is no opinion formation process. There is a "Yes/no communication", or opinions are stifled or devalued. The "censor in your head" stops unconventional opinions from even being expressed. The time is too short.

### Decision-making phase

- **Objective:** A decision is made on which opinion the committee represents in which way, and which objectives and solutions will be realised.
- **Important:** It's worth not making majority decisions too early on. Minority opinions often introduce important aspects to the table that will lead to a better solution. Those who do not feel like they are being taken seriously will often engage less as a result or become notorious naysayers.
- **Chair's tasks:** Clearly formulate decisions again in order to prevent situations where things appear to have been agreed upon but have not in reality. If needed, hold a formal vote. Any provisions regarding quorums, etc., must be made known to the chair.
- **Stumbling blocks:** Decisions are made too early or are unclear.

### Implementation phase

- **Objectives:** It is clarified who will work on what and by when.
- **Important:** Some good decisions fail because it has not been agreed exactly who is responsible for their implementation, which steps are necessary and which deadlines are in place. Depending on the item, the planning steps may require further decisions.
- **Chair's tasks:** Make binding agreements and ensure that they are set out in the minutes.
- **Stumbling block:** No binding deadlines are set.

## Techniques for leading discussions can be learned

As chair, you should have some minimal knowledge of leading discussions. This doesn't mean being an expert at arguments. Rather, it's important to create a good atmosphere in which everyone feels comfortable. It's also important to put a stop to any "bad habits" by individual participants without embarrassing them. Here are a few tips:

- **Making the unclear clear:** Try to understand what the speaker might have meant and formulate it in your own words: "If I've understood correctly, then you would like / mean / have concerns that..." This requires them to either confirm or specify their statement.
- **Ensuring that everyone stays on topic:** If the participants don't respond to each other but jump from one point to another, say: "I'd like us to first discuss X's opinion, but have noted the point you've addressed so we can discuss it afterwards."
- **Intervening to put discussions back on course:** Steer the conversation back on track by using "I" messages as far as possible, namely saying what you've observed, how this is affecting things in your opinion, how it has affected you and what you would now like to happen: "I notice that the discussion is currently only involving the two of you, Maja and Erwin. I have concerns that other votes will miss out as a result. Let's take some time to listen to others for a while and hear what they are thinking."
- **Summarising the discussions:** Take some brief notes on the points you would like to mention in an interim or final summary, or collect such points on a flipchart.

### Particularly important:

If you as chair would like to get involved in discussions on an item or are very biased, ask someone else to take over the chairpersonship. This should be planned and coordinated before the meeting. It's not possible to be sovereign and neutral and join a heated discussion at the same time.

## Good meetings are lively and eventful

You don't always have to necessarily sit at meetings. Feel free to bring some movement into the meeting, especially for main agenda items, to stimulate some thinking. Here are some ideas:

- **Standing groups:** Groups of 2-3 people stand together and briefly discuss a topic, after which everyone walks around and finds another small group. At the end, you note the important points that have come out of those meetings.
- **Walk:** Send people on a short walk in groups of two, e.g. with the task of gathering ideas. Each group of two must note down and bring back at least two ideas.
- **Subject-focused wanderings:** Write questions, theories and suggestions on a topic on flipchart sheets and distribute them on different tables in the room. The participants can then walk around at will or in small groups, discuss the statements and note down their opinions on the sheets, e.g. the advantages and disadvantages of a solution, any other ideas, etc.
- **Brief exchange:** Enable (and make it easier for) everyone to express their opinions: Encourage people to discuss an aspect briefly (e.g. two minutes) in groups of two, and then switch up the tandems.

## Take a break

For longer meetings in particular, it's worth factoring in a break. The conversations that happen during breaks are often very important. Sometimes new ideas can surface during informal discussions and when having a drink, and staunch opinions can ease, etc.

## Find out what people are thinking

If you would like to try something new, then say this to your executive committee members: "I read in a vitamin B working paper that we could also do a walk instead of just sitting there and discussing things. I'd like to try this out now and hear how you found it afterwards."

It's important to keep discussing the meeting culture (length, structure, frequency, conversation culture, etc.). This can also take place at the end of a meeting, or you could factor this in as part of a retreat, for example.