

# Skills for Working Together: Managing Meetings

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**COAs and Advisory Chair should meet each month to set the agenda.  
The chair or vice chair always runs the meeting.**

## *Use Agendas*

What's going to happen at your next meeting? What business will be discussed? What issues will require a decision? Will someone give an informal report? Don't be taken by surprise at your meetings ... Plan! First prepare a list of the business you have to discuss. The list should name only items that require the attention of the membership. Next consider how items will be presented: what will be discussed and how to present it, given the other items on your meeting agenda.

An agenda is a step-by-step list of subjects to be covered. You should send all members a tentative agenda a few days before the meeting, for the following reasons:

- to insure that important business is not overlooked
- to remind people of the meeting
- to help members identify important items and prepare to discuss them
- to help members focus on issues, contribute and feel a sense of progress
- to ensure that meetings start on time, move forward and stop on time

Minutes from the last meetings should be distributed ahead of the meeting when possible. Even an abbreviated set of minutes listing decisions and needed action is helpful. The meeting agenda must be flexible and open to revision. Early in the meeting the presiding officer should ask the group to review the agenda. Have any pressing issues been omitted? Is there need for some revision? When making revisions, consider meeting time. Do not lengthen the meeting time; instead, decide which items can be deferred to a later date. A flexible agenda ensures that your meeting will not suffocate by structure.

## *Expect Action*

Agendas that are too brief or vague can actually hinder the progress of a meeting. Properly prepared agendas, on the other hand, almost always make meetings run smoothly. In a well prepared agenda, items are elaborated. For example: an item simply as "Fair Board Report" doesn't tell very much, adding "select representatives and consider alternative date" says more. Be certain to indicate the expected action: "for information," "for discussion," and "for decision." These phrases help members anticipate and prepare for action. If a particular person has responsibility for an item, place that person's name in parentheses just below or to the right of the item. This information tells members who the contact person is and serves as a guide for the chair.

## ***Establish The Order of Business***

Groups often establish a standard order of business to give members a sense of security. Knowing what to expect allows members to focus on relevant issues rather than try to anticipate the unknown.

Developing a good social environment helps a Council become a team for getting its work done in a timely manner. Council chairs are encouraged to regularly have activities to build the Council into a team. This includes providing time for Council members to interact at the beginning of meetings, for building a climate of trust, encouraging interaction among the members and accepting individuals as members of the Council. The following agenda outline is commonly used:

- Welcome
- Approval of minutes of last meeting
- Treasurer's report (quarterly may be sufficient)
- Public Awareness Team report
- Other business
- Liaison report (an invitation by the chair to the commissioner, delegation representative and UNH representative to give a quick update on anything they would like.)
- Program report

## ***Set Priorities***

The order of items can be critical to the success of a meeting. Some ordering is obvious. For example, the budget for equipment purchases should be discussed before your equipment needs. Some ordering is not so obvious. Here are several guidelines that will help establish priorities.

1. The early part of a meeting is usually the most lively and creative; therefore, items requiring mental energy, bright ideas and clear heads should appear early on the agenda. An item of great interest to everyone might be scheduled 15-20 minutes into the meeting to avoid the attention lag that typically occurs at this point.
2. The order of items influences the meeting atmosphere. Some items tend to unite the group, while others divide it. The leader may want to start on a point of unity, progress to items likely to evoke differing opinions and end the meeting on a unifying note.
3. Long agendas require momentum because members need to feel that progress is being made. Use of labels of "information," "decisions" and "discussion" help to set the agenda. Information items should come first. Since they require no group action, they should be brief. Decision items should come next on the agenda. If a decision item becomes a discussion, table it until you are ready for the discussion items. This procedure may not cover the entire agenda, but it will keep the meeting on track and leave members with a feeling of accomplishment.

4. The order of items can save valuable time. Listing "any other business" on an agenda may save time in planning but it can turn into a frustrating waste of time at a meeting. Unstructured or informal discussions are healthy, but they must be managed so that they come near the close of a meeting and only if time permits.

### ***Manage Time***

When it comes to time, flexibility is more a hindrance than a help. Time is important to most people. Therefore, you should start and stop at the time specified on your agenda. Starting late for the benefit of latecomers penalizes people who arrive on time and makes it difficult to end on time. Ending on time enables people to better plan their other commitments. Repeated late starts encourage people to arrive at a later time and to form bad habits. Meetings that drag on past the ending time can contribute to feelings of guilt, resentment, impatience, and tension.

### ***Appoint Committees***

#### ***Standing Committees***

Standing committees are reappointed regularly to handle ongoing concerns. Examples include membership, finance, publicity, and program committees. Standing committees deal with the ongoing processes of an organization. They are concerned with system maintenance and evaluation.

#### ***Ad Hoc Committees/Task Forces***

Ad Hoc committees are short duration committees formed to accomplish a specific task. There must be a clear differentiation between ad hoc and standing committees. Ad hoc committees are formed to accomplish tasks such as research, study, evaluation or problem solving. Some special considerations for ad hoc committees are:

1. They should be of predetermined duration
2. They can be formed by the Council or the chair
3. They can elicit participation from outside the Council
4. They should have a clear commission outlining what they should accomplish.

*Source: Pennsylvania State University Cooperative Extension, 12/87*

See also: <http://extension.unh.edu/Counties/TenQuick.pdf>