

The Facilitation Laboratory: Public Meetings: Best Practices

The Facilitation Laboratory

A training program with University of New Hampshire
Theatre PowerPlay Interactive Development,
NH Listens and UNH Cooperative Extension



University of
New Hampshire

Cooperative Extension

Room Set-up:

- Be aware of the seating arrangement on the board and consider mixing the seating on the board so people are not grouped by gender, age, affiliations
- Consider the seating (table, chair, podium) arrangements – formal, informal – facing each other or the audience
- Use name plates to identify board members
- Consider filming meetings for public access but also consider how it may impact the behavior of board members, staff and the public

Board:

- Be clear on the role of the board and the scope of decision-making (are you making recommendations or final decision)
- Be clear on the role of the staff member in the meeting
- Be clear on rules of procedure or how the board will function
- Everyone should understand the key roles and powers of the chairperson
- Limit use of electronics – computers are ok if taking notes but phones are not ok
- Take minutes and read minutes before approval
- Don't talk over each other on board or the public
- Roberts Rules of Order are not required and often complex for people- simple straightforward rules are best
- Consider side discussions between board members – before, during and after meetings. Are they permitted, are they constructive, what is the perception of them by other board members and the public
- Board members should be mindful of their body language and the message it sends to the public and other board members. Work toward active listening and engagement
- Board members should come prepared by having read materials and minutes

Role of Chair:

- Agree on structure for discussion in advance
- Chair asks board to brainstorm pros and cons of issue
- Chair should establish ground rules to be used for respect and courtesy
- Chair should ask board members– “what did you hear/learn from public hearing”
- Strategic use of time limits for speaking (both for board members and public)
- Board members should share specific emails and phone calls as part of the formal record on issues
- In managing emotional discussions – decide whether you will defer or ride it out
- Use a clear, shared agenda
- Don't rotate chairperson just for the sake of rotating – chairs need certain skills
- Chair should explain the process at the meeting and how it works
- Chair should be clear, firm, respectful and listening

- Chair can vote but should remain neutral in discussion
- Chair should see that business is conducted in a fair, open and efficient manner
- The Chair is responsible to maintain order
- Chair should balance his/her participation with obligation to conduct business fairly
- Chair's demeanor can set the tone of the meeting – professional and friendly is best!

Engaging the Public:

- Make eye contact with those speaking
- Thank the public who are speaking – “we want to hear you”
- Be welcoming- especially to those who are less comfortable or participating for the first time
- Let speakers/public know that they are out of time and what you will do with what you heard (consider, add to the record, refer them to someone, follow up)
- Treat public who participates frequently with respect and courtesy
- Offer a solution or steps toward a solution
- Discussion is encouraged but the board must continue its work
- Public comment: Not required to allow public comment. Public comment is required in public hearing or when rights are affected.
- Meeting must be open to the public but public does not have the right to speak
- The only people with right to speak are board members and those invited to speak unless the board decides otherwise
- Questioner addressed chair and chair repeat question in impartial way
- Consider who is not participating at meetings and encourage them to attend and make them comfortable by explaining how things work

Disruptive Behavior/Conflict on the board or with the public:

- Chair and disruptive board member meet to talk about the problems and solutions with how they are interacting on the board
- Give disruptive board member a specific task
- Set a clear set of procedures or rules so board members do not argue about the process and procedures
- Be respectful
- Be aware when actions are escalating the situation or deflating it such as pounding the table, standing up, shouting, threatening to call the police (most of these escalate the situation)
- Chair can ask a person to leave and ask for law enforcement if person won't come to order
- Public comment can be controlled by restricting subjects to agenda or not on agenda or limiting time and preventing disruption
- All persons speaking should address the board not others in the audience
- Letters or written materials don't have to be read into minutes but a summary should be given
- Have a plan for what to do in seriously disruptive or dangerous situations

For more information contact Molly.Donovan@unh.edu at UNH Cooperative Extension or go to <http://extension.unh.edu/Community/Civic-Engagement>

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