

Attending meetings is something most students dread. Is this because meetings are often dull, unproductive, disorganized, and too long? The burden of successfully running a meeting falls into the hands of those student leaders that have been elected. Unfortunately, students are often elected to positions without proper knowledge or experience, and figuring out what to do is a matter of trial and error. With proper planning and preparation, any meeting can be effective and enjoyable.

Meetings have several functions. They give members a chance to discuss and evaluate goals and objectives, keep updated on current events, provide a chance to communicate and keep the group cohesive. Most of all, meetings allow groups to pull resources together for decision making. If the facilitator starts with a careful plan and finishes with a thorough follow-up, the meeting will run smoothly. The following are some tips to help you make your next meeting successful, productive and even fun.

### Where to Begin?

Student leaders should familiarize themselves with the organization's history, traditions, and operating procedures before even announcing a meeting. Start with the organization's constitution, bylaws, or other documents which describe the rules of the group. Look at old minutes or talk to senior members about how meetings ran in the past. If you are organizing a new group, talk to several active organizations on campus to see how they operate. Become familiar with campus resources, facilities, and personnel so you can know where and who to go to for help.

The work of most organizations is accomplished between meetings, not in them. Meetings are generally for planning, reporting, and decision making. Anyone who is scheduled to speak at a meeting should prepare presentations well in advance. If leaders spend some time before the meeting to plan each detail, a lot of headaches will be alleviated. For example:

1. Define the purpose of the meeting.
2. Develop an agenda. Below is a sample agenda:
  - A. Call to Order
  - B. Approval of Agenda
  - C. Correction and Approval of Minutes
  - D. Reports
  - E. Old Business
  - F. New Business
  - G. Announcements
3. Distribute the agenda and circulate background material, lengthy documents or articles prior to the meeting so members will be prepared and feel involved.

### Making the Arrangements

Choose an appropriate meeting time. Set a time limit and stick to it, if possible. Remember, members have other commitments. They will be more likely to attend meetings if you make them productive, predictable and as short as possible. If possible, arrange the room so that members face each other, e.g., a circle or semicircle. For large groups, try U-shaped rows. Choose a location suitable to your group's size. Small rooms with too many people get stuffy and create tension. A larger room is more comfortable and encourages individual expression. A room too large may encourage members to daydream or become isolated from discussion.

Let all members know about the meeting. Don't rely on only one method of contact. Use the phone, mail, computer, word-of-mouth and public posting to notify members. If you have an office with a phone line, put a message on an answering machine that announces the date and time of the next meeting. That way a member can call any time day or night to get information. Always reserve the meeting space immediately after a meeting or for a semester at a time.

### During The Meeting

It is important that a leader serves as a guide in a meeting, helping members interact in a controlled environment. It is the leader's job to ensure that the conversation does not get too heated and basic courtesies are followed. It is best to decide on some guidelines prior to the meeting so every member knows how decisions will be made. For example:

- Who may recognize a speaker?
- How is a time limit for a topic set?
- How are discussions initiated or motions made?

How is voting done?

How are disagreements settled?

If something is not on the agenda, how will it be handled?

If a motion fails, can it be discussed again?

If strict parliamentary procedure is used, how are members trained in its use?

A well-run meeting allows organizations to accomplish their goals and keeps members actively involved and interested. Being able to run successful meetings is something that is learned through practice. The following are a few pointers for a successful meeting:

1. Greet members and make them feel welcome, even late members (when possible).
2. When possible have ice-breaking and team-building exercises to make your members feel special and build cohesion.
3. Start on time - end on time.
4. Review the agenda and set priorities for the meeting and stick to them.
5. Use visual aids for interest (e.g., posters, diagrams, etc.).
6. Encourage group discussion to get all points of view and ideas.
7. Keep conversation focused on the topic.
8. Tactfully end discussions when they are getting nowhere or becoming destructive or unproductive.
9. Keep minutes of the meeting for future reference in case a question or problem arises.
10. As a leader, be a role model by listening, showing interest, appreciation and confidence in members.
11. Admit mistakes and ask for help.
12. Set a date, time and place for the next meeting.

### Taking Minutes

Minutes should reflect what was done, not what was said. Generally personal opinions and quoted discussion is avoided. The minutes need to include all the main motions, a summary of the discussions, and assignments people volunteered to take on. They should include a report on any actions taken and summary of any reports given. Some groups designate one person to take the minutes at every meeting; others rotate the job. Do what works best for your group, as long as the information gets recorded and preserved somewhere. The minutes can be dated and signed by an officer of the organization.

The minutes of a meeting should include the following (if they apply to your particular group and your meetings):

- date, time and place of meeting;
- list of people attending, and any members who were absent;
- time the meeting was called to order;
- approval of the previous meeting's minutes, and any amendments;
- summary of reports, announcements, and other information shared;
- proposals, resolutions, motions, amendments, a summary of the discussion, and final disposition (if you are using formal parliamentary procedure, record who made the motion and who seconded it).
  - Motions and resolutions should be recorded verbatim and should be read back during the meeting to make sure they have been accurately transcribed.
  - Summarize the discussion, capturing key points and decisions reached. When someone takes on an assignment, a deadline is set, or other important agreements are reached, make sure to record them. This will serve as a reminder when the minutes are read later on. Separate fact from opinion. Facts are objective and indisputable; opinions are personal views. Take this sentence: "The low turnout for the event could be due to poor advertising." Whose idea is this? Attribute opinions to their source (e.g. "Jane suggested that...." or "The group concluded that....").
- time of adjournment;
- next meeting date, time and location; and
- name of person taking the minutes.

### After the Meeting

Write up and distribute minutes within 3 or 4 days. Quick action reinforces the importance of meeting and reduces errors of memory. The person who ran the meeting should discuss any problems that arose during the meeting with other officers. He or she needs to follow up on delegation decisions. It is the leader's responsibility to see that all members understand and carry out their duties. Any unfinished business is put on the agenda for the next meeting.

**Sources:** *Antileader Guidelines #C6: Minutes and Record Keeping*, published by the Student Activities Office at the University of California, Irvine.

*Ten Tips on Organizaing and Writing Meeting Minutes*, published by The Communication Workshop, New York, NY