

Tools for Neighborhood Organizers

**Great Meetings!**

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# Introduction

## GREAT MEETINGS!

Consider the last time you attended a meeting. Of any organization. During the meeting, were you involved or were you bored? Did something of importance happen or was it a waste of time? Did time go by quickly or did you think the meeting would never end? Are you looking forward to the next meeting or have you already prepared your excuse not to attend?

Chances are, if you came away feeling good about the meeting it's because:

- The meeting started and ended on time.
- You were greeted at the door, made to feel welcome and everyone had a chance to introduce themselves.
- The meeting room was comfortable and arranged so people could see and hear one another.
- You knew what was on the agenda and the chairperson stuck to it.
- There were important decisions to be made; you participated in the discussion and felt your views were respected (even if you held a minority position).
- No one person dominated the meeting and several people gave short, informed and well prepared presentations.
- By the end of the meeting, it was clear what decisions had been made, who was responsible for carrying them out, when you would meet again and why.

**Good meetings make an organization. Bad Meetings kill them.**

Had you just attended such a meeting of your neighborhood organization, chances are you would join the organization--if you weren't already a member. If you were, chances are you'd become more active. Were you already active, at the next meeting you'd bring along a few potential members.

***It's been said, with little exaggeration, that good meetings will make an organization. Bad meetings will kill one.***

## PREPARING FOR GREAT MEETINGS

**Good meetings don't just happen**

Good meetings don't just happen. Good meetings are planned in advance, with attention to detail. In fact, the most demanding and the most time consuming part of any *great* meeting is in the preparation. If the last meeting you attended was a great one, or even just a good one, it's because of the planning that happened in advance. Planning that took into account the following principles:

**Meet with a purpose**

### 1. Meet with a purpose

A good neighborhood organization will meet regularly, at least once a month. However, never meet just to meet--meet with a purpose. (The same is true, by the way, of committee meetings and planning meetings.) Meetings should be used to:

- Plan for action
- Take action
- Make important decisions

A great meeting will last for about an hour, maybe a little more. It will focus on just one thing--a **major** issue.

**Prepare in advance**

### 2. Prepare an Agenda

One of the key tools in holding great meetings is the agenda. The agenda is always prepared in advance of the general meeting by the the leadership team.

Think of the agenda as the program of a play and the chairperson as the director: the characters and the plot are introduced in the opening act; the action builds to a climax; and, then the meeting concludes with activities that leave the participants feeling good about the organization, in a mood to carry out specific actions and with an understanding of what was accomplished.

Before drafting the agenda, write down your goals for the meeting, consider how you will accomplish those goals and how long each step will take. When the agenda is prepared, it should list topics to be discussed, action to be taken, and an estimate of the amount of time each item should take. Make sure everyone at the meeting has a copy of the agenda or post it on a large sheet of paper next to the chairperson.

# The Agenda

<b>AGENDA</b>	
7:00 p.m.	Welcome & Introductions
7:05 p.m.	Review and approve Agenda
7:10 p.m.	Minutes from previous meeting
7:15 p.m.	<b>MAJOR ISSUE</b> (A Proposal for Action) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion</li> <li>• Decision</li> <li>• Division of Labor</li> </ul>
7:45 p.m.	<b>MINOR ISSUE</b>
7:55 p.m.	Open Time
8:10 p.m.	Summary of Meeting (by Chairperson)
8:15 p.m.	Adjourn

<b><i>DIVISION OF LABOR</i></b>		
Jobs	Who	When
_____		
_____		
_____		
_____		

- ✓ Determine **ahead of time** how much time will be devoted to each agenda item and include the time on the printed agenda. The chairperson can then use the time limits as a tool to corral wandering presenters, limit debate to the current issue on the agenda, or bring a sidetracked group back from a trip into the wilderness.
- ✓ **Open the meeting** by welcoming people, briefly introducing the chairperson, the presenters and VIPs. If the audience is small, have everyone introduce themselves
- ✓ **Review the agenda and the purpose** of the meeting. Ask for approval of the agenda. Occasionally, someone will suggest another item of business. If appropriate, the chair may add the item under additional business. If not, explain how to get an issue on a future agenda.
- ✓ The meeting should be action oriented and focus on a single **major issue** about which a decision is to be made or action taken. Get people warmed up by starting out with some easy decisions--like approving the minutes of the previous meeting. Next, while people are still fresh, take on the hardest, most controversial, most time consuming issue.
- ✓ Near the end of the meeting people are likely to be tired, so save the fairly easy, non-controversial, consensus building topic (a **minor issue**) for later. The minor issue might be a report on a project in progress or the appointing of a committee to work on a new issue.
- ✓ **Summarize** the accomplishments of the meeting, jobs to be done, next steps and job assignments.
- ✓ **Refreshments** should be available after the meeting is adjourned so people are encouraged to stay around and socialize.

✓ **Tip:**

Organizations live for participation and die for lack of it. The first goal of every meeting should be to involve people. Involved in the meeting itself, they'll contribute in other ways later.

1. *Listen to what people have to say.*
2. *Thank people who contribute.*
3. *Encourage those who are quiet*
4. *Get commitments for jobs to be done.*

### 3. Pay Attention to Details

**Place:** Where you meet is important. It should be accessible to everyone, a place where people feel comfortable, and just big enough to hold the participants (nothing is more dispiriting than a cavernous, half-empty hall).

**Setup:** Arrange chairs in a circle or semi-circle to lend an air of informality, encourage group interaction and foster a sense of cohesiveness. Arranging chairs in "auditorium" fashion stifles person-to-person communication and creates an "us" vs. "them" feeling. Don't set up too many chairs. If the crowd is smaller than expected, empty chairs might signal a "failure." It's better to set up more chairs for an "overflow" crowd.

- ✓ **Tip:** *If turn-out is smaller than expected, don't bemoan the fact--you'll make people who did attend feel as though they've wasted their time. Evaluate turn-out later, in a leadership meeting.*

For small meetings, sit everyone around a table with the chairperson at the head. For larger meetings place the chairperson and other speakers at a table in front of the semi-circle. People will then know who is in charge of the meeting.

**Props:** Bring an easel, butcher paper, markers and masking tape. Record important points on the paper and hang on the wall. If the agenda isn't photocopied, prepare it ahead of time on butcher paper and hang it behind the chairperson.

If you're using audio-visual equipment, check out the room in advance for electrical outlets, extension cords (with three-prong adapters!) and a place for microphones.

**Sign-up Sheet:** Never, ever have a meeting or event without a Sign-up sheet. It's an awful feeling to hold a successful meeting only to realize, when it's too late, there's no way to follow-up with a call or a letter. The sign-up sheet should clearly ask for name, address, city, *zip-code* and phone. Start out the Sign-up sheet yourself and others will follow by example.

**Greeters:** If it's a "public" meeting or event, one or more members should greet people at the door and direct them to a sign-up table. The table should be staffed, there should be several sign-up sheets (so people don't have to stand in line), name tags, and copies of the

agenda.

**Refreshments:** Place refreshments in the back of the room so people can reach them without disrupting the meeting. Unless it's a very long (planned) meeting, don't interrupt the meeting with a refreshment break: at best the meeting will be prolonged; at worst people may never return to the meeting.

#### **4. Involve The Maximum Number Of People.**

**Every leader, and future leader should have a role.**

Have you ever been to a meeting where one person chaired the meeting, presented the reports and engaged in debate? If so, the crowd was probably a lot smaller the next time around.

By involving as many people as possible in the work of organizing and running meetings, several positive things happen. No one person is overburdened; involved people become committed people; and, people attending the meeting will appreciate the attention to detail. Don't forget too, when you are trying to increase turn-out, someone with a role to play or a task to complete *will* be at the meeting!

**Chairperson:** The Chair facilitates and directs the meeting, keeps everyone on-track, makes sure all items on the agenda are covered, encourages participation, and diplomatically discourages long-winded and irrelevant confabulation. Since the meeting is action oriented and important decisions are being made, the Chair will guide the discussion towards that end by allowing all sides to be heard, all the while maintaining control and bringing the discussion to a timely conclusion. Certainly, there is an art to being a good chair, but it's a learnable one. With that in mind, some organizations pass the role of chairperson around, meeting to meeting. But make sure the chairperson for major public meetings is already experienced in the art.

✓ **Tip: Instead of inviting an "outside" speaker to talk about an issue, problem or opportunity, involve several members by having them do the research between meetings and present their findings to the membership.**

**Presenters:** Committee reports, "educationals," the reporting of the results of a study, and the presentation of an issue, are opportunities to involve several different people. The secretary or the scribe should report on the actions taken at the last meeting, and the treasurer should report on the finances of the organization.

**Scribe:** At each meeting, a scribe or note-taker should record the actions taken by the membership. (Here's a good use for that butcher paper and masking tape).

**Timekeeper:** Many groups appoint a time-keeper who keeps

track of the clock and reminds the Chair and participants when time for an agenda item is about to expire. (Note: If justified, the Chair may seek agreement from the group to extend discussion on important items).

***Greeters:*** Several people can be involved in welcoming people, staffing the sign-up table, and even as "ushers" at large meetings.

**Increase turn-out by giving people a job to do.**

***Openers and Closers:*** Many organizations open and close meetings with a song, a reading or a reflection led by one of the members. Though this often depends on the will or inclination of the group, some type of opening and closing can do a lot to help the group feel united.

***Logistics:*** Pass around the jobs of bringing refreshments, setting up the room and cleaning up afterwards so that no one person feels over-burdened or type-cast into the "mother" role.

**Be respectful of the people who attend. Start and end your meetings on time.**

- ✓ ***Tip: Establish a policy of starting (and ending) meetings on time. People who arrive promptly shouldn't have to wait on late comers--who probably arrive late because they figure the meeting won't begin on time. By opening with a brief welcome, short introductions and a review of the agenda, the meeting starts on time but people who come a few minutes late, or are just settling in, won't miss the substance of the meeting.***

#### **4. Bring People Out**

As a rule, people don't respond to just a mailing, a poster or a notice in a newspaper, although each is helpful in notifying or reminding people of an upcoming meeting. The only sure-fire way of getting people to an event is to talk to them--directly.

For membership events, a written notice or invitation should be mailed far enough in advance so people can make plans to attend. Two weeks is about the minimum. One week before the meeting, follow-up with a personal phone call. Talk to people about what's on the agenda and the expected highlights of the meeting. If controversial issues are being debated, let people know about the issues so they can come prepared (as the organizer-leader, you will also gain a better sense of how people are feeling about the issue). A day or two before the meeting, call back those people who said they plan to attend and those who were undecided. Keep track of those who say they will attend.



**The loneliest feeling is to  
organize a meeting to which  
no one comes!**

## **Tips and Tricks:**

- ✓ When turn-out for a meeting is important, organizers and leaders should make a commitment to one another to turn-out several friends and neighbors. Each person should be specific about the number of people she/he will bring. Following the meeting, check back and see how they did.
- ✓ Perhaps the exception to the personal contact rule, and it's rare, is the advertised presence of a guest speaker who is very well known or very controversial, or both. Sometimes too, the novelty of a new organization, or of an issue, will attract a good size crowd to the first meeting with a minimum amount of work by the organizers. But the novelty will wear off and future meetings will be lightly attended unless there is a turn-out plan.
- ✓ Increase turn-out by sharing the work load. Ask people to give rides to others. One person can bring coffee, another the cups and yet another the donuts. One crew of people can set-up the chairs, another take them down.
- ✓ Arrange for child-care so parents with children will feel welcome

## **5. Do Follow-Up**

Soon, very soon after the meeting, begin the follow-up:

**After every meeting, evaluate  
it! What worked well? What  
can be improved next time?**

1. Leaders should get together and evaluate the meeting. Were the goals met? What was good about the meeting? What specific improvements could be made next time?
2. The Scribe should prepare the meeting notes and distribute copies to the leadership. A copy should be placed in the organization's permanent notebook.
3. A designated leader should call members and others who were expected, but failed to show. Give them the highlights of the meeting, find out why they couldn't come.

**The follow-up to a great meeting is just as important as the meeting itself.**

4. Every one who participated or contributed to the meeting should get a thank-you call.
5. Contact new members or potential members who attended the meeting. See if they have questions or comments. Encourage potential members to join, perhaps by setting up an individual meeting. Meet one on one with new members who show leadership potential.
6. Take note of commitments and project undertaken. Check in with people on a regular basis to see how they are progressing. At the next meeting, copies of the previous meeting's minutes should be available for people to read, progress reports on major and minor issues should be made to the full membership.