



Tips for Running Effective Neighborhood Association Meetings

The way that meetings are run will affect how members become and stay involved in the association. If meetings rarely start on time or are dominated by a few people, members will become frustrated and will stop coming to meetings. When meetings are well run, opinions are respected, and the agenda is followed, members will feel more willing to participate in other activities of the association.

Meeting Arrangements

The best arrangement for a community meeting is a circle of chairs. People sitting in a circle can communicate better. Tables often form barriers and are easy to hide behind. Avoid using tables unless they are needed for maps or handouts. Choose a neutral room that will just barely accommodate everyone. This will allow the energy of the group to stay within the group and add to your feelings of enthusiasm. Meeting locations could include a neighborhood church or community center, a member's home, or a favorite local restaurant.

Agendas

Every meeting must have an agenda or purpose. Spend time before the meeting deciding not only what to discuss, but also how long and in what order you will discuss the items. It is helpful to set two or three substantial objectives or goals for the year. It is also useful to put emotional or controversial issues at the end of the agenda. This allows you to take care of small, but necessary decisions early in the meeting. When listing agenda items, it's always good to list a time limit. It's possible that you will go over or under the limit on some items, but will tend to keep the meeting on track. Do not overload the agenda. Try to stay within 1 to 1 ½ hours and allow some time for refreshments and mingling. For more information, see the Neighborhood Association Toolkit.

Running a Meeting

Start the meeting on time. Do not penalize those on time by making them wait for latecomers. Go ahead and start the meeting with less important agenda items. By doing this, you will reinforce the behavior of those who arrive on time without excluding those who are late. Make sure someone takes the minutes and records the meeting so that those who were unable to attend can still keep up with the activities of the association. If you do not have a secretary, rotate this task.

Dealing with Difficult People

- When a point is being discussed too long:
 - Summarize; or
 - Suggest tabling the question for a later time.



- When two members get into a heated discussion:
 - Summarize points made by each and turn the discussion back to the group and/or
 - Invite the two to stay after the meeting when the three of you can talk it over.

- When coping with the “one-man” show:
 - Interrupt with a statement giving the speaker credit for his contribution but politely asking him to hold his other points until later and/or
 - Interrupt with “You have brought up many points that will keep us busy for a long time. Would anyone like to take up one of these points?”

- When a speaker drifts from the subject:
 - Interrupt, give him credit for his idea but explain that he is departing from the main point; or
 - Propose to the group the question of whether it wants to stray from the outline or follow it; or
 - Bring the discussion back to the topic by using the related idea as the transition.

- When a member has difficulty expressing himself:
 - Build up his confidence by expressing appreciation for what he has said and then rephrase his material with a preface such as “Is this what you mean, Mr. Jones?”

Participation

Set realistic expectations about attendance. You may not need large attendance at every meeting. Do not focus on what you consider poor attendance. Concentrate on coming up with techniques to increase attendance. Set a tone at meetings where everyone’s ideas are welcome and respected and no one is put down. Consider establishing a Membership Committee to focus on recruiting new members. Be realistic about what people can do given their other responsibilities. Respect all contributions, no matter how small.

Ending the Meeting

It is surprising how many meetings are allowed to just fizzle out. Meetings should end with a plan of action. Ask committees to research an issue and report back to the group. Summarize what has been decided. Next decide on the date, time, and place of the next meeting before members leave. Most importantly, in addition to addressing concerns in the neighborhood, plan enjoyable neighborhood activities that will bring the neighborhood together, such as a block party, neighborhood garden, or card club. If those in the neighborhood see the exciting activities happening around them, they will be more likely to want to participate in your neighborhood association.

