Top Tips for Making the Most of Your Meetings

1. **Accept that there is always room for improvement!**

Be open and willing to accept that there are things about your meetings that need changing. It’s infinitely better to recognise that some things aren’t working than to bury your head in the sand and pretend things are ok. Encourage group members to be honest about how they feel meetings are working, and to make suggestions for improvements.

2. **Make sure the group makes an honest assessment of its meetings at least once a year.**

Remember that effective meetings are essential to your group having a healthy, active membership. Your regular meeting is the most important thing about your group. Regularly reviewing your meetings and making improvements is therefore a very valuable use of time.

3. **Make sure your meetings meet EVERYONE’S needs**

Never lose sight of the fact that although your meetings may work for you, the same may well not be true for others, particularly new people checking out the group for the first time, someone who’s been out-of-touch for a while or who is uncertain about the group. Put yourself in the shoes of these people, work out what they will need from your meetings and then take action to improve your meetings accordingly. To do this, ask yourself the following questions:

- What will these people be expecting to happen at the meeting?
- What do you want them to think/feel/see when they first walk in?
- What do you need them to go home thinking and feeling?
- What will enable these needs and expectations to be met?

Other things to remember include:

- Anyone who wasn’t at your last meeting will be out-of-the-loop in terms of what you’re up to. If you immediately pick up where you left off last time, without a clear recap, these people will feel excluded from the outset. **Make sure everyone knows the basics of what is being discussed before you start.**

- New people are unlikely to have received an agenda in the post, so it’s much better to have your agenda clearly displayed on a sheet of flipchart paper or similar for everyone to see. This also works better than everyone having to spend the meeting shuffling papers around to check the agenda.

- New and ‘wavering’ members will use your meeting to judge whether the group is something that is worth being part of. They will therefore be looking to see that the group is dynamic, interesting and **actually doing worthwhile things!** Ensuring that there are clear actions being taken forward for the next meeting, good, inclusive and productive discussions, a firm but fair chair, and a chance for people to chat socially are vital to giving this impression to people.
• Remember that these people are still ‘testing out’ the group and probably not ready to make a firm commitment to getting involved. It is therefore essential to strike the right balance between being inclusive and giving people the chance to participate, and putting pressure on them to become actively involved and take things on. Don't make ‘asks’ of people until they've fully joined the group and got established. Get people to choose tasks to do from a display of Post-It notes rather than allocating them to individuals.

• A lot of people suffer from confidence problems and have difficulty participating in group settings. Put yourself in the shoes of these people, and think of ways to make your meetings as inclusive and unintimidating as possible.

Ways of doing this include breaking up into small groups to discuss issues, asking people to come to a meeting with thoughts on a particular issue instead of just asking for suggestions on the spot, and having a proactive chair who invites everyone to give their view, and stops one or two individuals from dominating the conversation.

4. Make sure your meetings deliver on your aims and objectives

Your group meetings should perform several key functions:

- They are the time when you as a group choose your activities for a given period and produce your work plan for the 6 months/year ahead. Make sure you dedicate a meeting every 6 months/year to choosing the group's key pieces of work and doing a plan for each one.

- They are the key mechanism in enabling your group to deliver its work plan by identifying and allocating the specific tasks that need to be done before the next meeting, monitoring progress and changing your plans if necessary.

- They enable a group of individuals to become an effective team by getting to know each other, working towards common aims and celebrating successes!

If your meetings end without everyone understanding what tasks are going to be done before the next meeting, who is doing them and why (ie how they are delivering your overall aims and objectives), IT HASN’T BEEN AN EFFECTIVE MEETING!

5. Have a break

Schedule a short break in the middle of your meetings so that people have a few minutes to chat informally and get to know each other better, and to make the meeting less intense.

6. Remember the social side!

For the group to function as a team, the people in it need to get to know each other socially. But it’s important again to remember people’s diversity, and not to assume that going down the pub at the end of each meeting is going to be everyone’s cup of tea. Try different things like having a group day out twice a year, going for a meal, bowling etc. If you have a varied programme of social events, you will be offering something for everyone.
7. Beware of the ‘clique’ syndrome

Although it’s important that a group functions as a team, with good relationships between the members, it is equally important that it is open and welcoming to new members. Often, established groups where people know each other well can appear rather ‘cliquey’ to new members. This is why many groups have difficulty attracting and keeping new members. In addition to having a ‘member supporter’ to befriend new people….

- make sure that everyone in the group makes a real effort with any new members,
- make a conscious effort to bring them up-to-speed with what you’ve been working on and what your plans are,
- ensure that everyone introduces themselves fully (not just saying their name but something about themselves),
- invite them to an inclusive social event so that they can get to know you all better.

8. Pick a welcoming, accessible venue

Finding a suitable venue isn’t always easy. Many areas suffer from a real shortage of affordable, accessible community venues. It may seem extortionate paying £15 to hire a room, but having a good meeting place is one of the best investments your group can make. You won’t get new members if your meeting place is hard to find, smoky/noisy, not well-served by all transport modes, dark/dingy/cold etc. If you apply for a local community grant, you can make venue costs part of your funding application. Alternatively, instead of, or as well as, a membership fee for active members, you can just ask for everyone to contribute £1 or £1.50 each meeting to cover venue costs.