

NGO INFORMATION BULLETIN No. 7

MAKING THE MOST OF MEETINGS

Meetings are an integral part of citizen-based organisations. Yet too often little thought or planning is applied to making NGO meetings productive -- whether meetings of the governing board, standing committees, *ad hoc* committees or the general membership. But meetings are important to the NGO because they:

- promote attendance and encourage active participation of members
- improve the quality of decision-making

- create an environment for effective follow-through
- are critical to upgrading volunteer participation.

This issue of *NGO NEWS* will examine some basic procedures for improving the effectiveness of NGO meetings. We will look at guidelines that apply to meetings in general as well as suggestions for special meetings such as board meetings and the annual general meeting.

BASIC GUIDELINES FOR GOOD MEETINGS

BEFORE THE MEETING

- (1) Spread the workload for the meeting. Several people should have responsibility for individual items on the meeting agenda.
- (2) Provide adequate notice of the meeting. If possible, assign responsibility for making reminder calls a day or two in advance of the meeting. It is also a good idea to set the **next** meeting date while a group is still in session.
- (3) Prepare a good agenda. An agenda consisting of non-descriptive items such as *President's Report, Treasurer's Report, Old Business, New Business*, etc. does not give participants an opportunity to intelligently prepare for the meeting. The agenda should clearly state what the participants are being asked to consider, decide, or do.
- (4) Distribute the agenda and other materials **in advance** of the meeting.
- (5) Pay attention to the structure and sequencing of meeting events (this is not the same as preparing an agenda). The "flow" of the meeting will be influenced, for example, by whether the meeting focuses on decision-making or consensus building.
- (6) Carefully check on physical arrangements prior to the session. Is there chalk as well as a blackboard? Is there a spare bulb for the slide projector? Allow enough time for set-up prior to the meeting. If there is a breakdown in the physical arrangements, the meeting itself is bound to suffer.

*DURING THE MEETING **

- (1) Provide procedural mechanisms so that the chairperson (or any other person) does not dominate the meeting. Find ways to draw quieter, non-participants into meeting discussions. (See also box on *The Role of the Presiding Officer*.)
- (2) Identify ways to give participants a regular sense of accomplishment and momentum. In particular, members of committees or governing boards need to feel that tasks are being accomplished and have been well done.
- (3) Keep the meetings interesting. Consciously plan a part of the agenda for the purpose of making participants feel that they are "in the know," that they are a part of some of the exciting things that are happening within the organisation.
- (4) Pay attention to the niceties. Take time to determine how to make meetings more pleasant.
- (5) Provide a regular mechanism for acknowledgements. Common thoughtfulness is important in fostering a closer feeling of camaraderie and family within an organisation.

* A publication from the League of Women Voters of the United States can help NGOs with the procedural aspects of conducting meetings, particularly meetings of their governing boards or the business session of annual membership meetings. Using Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised as its authority, this straightforward pamphlet summarizes the role of officers, the conduct of business meetings (including how to properly handle motions), voting procedures, the nominating process and elections. It is a useful guide for NGO officers who want information on the application of parliamentary authority during meetings and on formal procedures that enable the organisation to achieve consensus on a maximum number of issues within a minimum amount of time. Publication #138 (entitled "Simplified Parliamentary Procedures") is available at US\$1.75 (includes shipping and handling) from the League of Women Voters of the U.S., 1730 M Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036 USA.

AFTER THE MEETING

- (1) If a date was set for the **next** meeting, a notice should be sent as soon as possible to those not in attendance.
- (2) If minutes were prepared as a part of the meeting, these need to be distributed as quickly as possible. It is a good idea to have a back-up notetaker to the NGO secretary whose minutes are for the official record (see also box on *Meeting Minutes*). Less formal back-up notes can give the chairperson immediate access to the action agenda growing out of the meeting (while official minutes are being prepared) and can capture some of the nuances of group interaction not available in the formal record.
- (3) Keep the group informed between meetings. Committee or board members, for example, need to know when action has been taken on their recommendations and decisions.
- (4) Thank you notes from a meeting chairperson, organisation president, or staff person *after* meetings, the sharing of interesting bits of information or news about the group's activities, or other deliberate, thoughtful, and on-going efforts to let members know they are important *between* meetings are also important.

THE ROLE OF THE PRESIDING OFFICER

The presiding officer or chairperson of a meeting should:

- Be ready to call the meeting to order at the time set.
- Follow the agenda and clarify what is happening and what is being voted on at all times.
- Deal firmly with whispering, commotion and frivolous or delaying debate and motions.
- See that debate is confined to the merits of the question and that personal comments are avoided. No one should speak more than twice on a subject, and no one should speak a second time until all who wish to speak have had a chance to do so.
- Talk no more than necessary. Except in small boards and committees, the presiding officer should not enter the debate without giving up the chair to a substitute until the motion under debate has been voted on.
- Remain calm and deal fairly with all sides regardless of personal opinion. To preserve this impartiality, the presiding officer abstains from voting except by ballot or to cast the deciding vote on an issue.

[Source: League of Women Voters (LWV), Publication #138]

MEETING MINUTES

Minutes should reflect what was done, not what was said, at a meeting. The common tendency is to report in too much detail. Minutes should contain:

- the date, place, time and type of meeting (regular, special);
- the names of the presiding officer, the secretary and, in boards and committees, the names of those present;
- action taken on the minutes of the previous meeting and corrections, if any;
- exact wording of each motion, the name of the maker and the disposition;
- the name and topic of guest speakers (their presentations need not be summarized);
- time of adjournment.

[Source: LWV, Publication #138]

BOARD MEETINGS

Special considerations apply to meetings of the organisation's governing board. This is due to the board's key role in providing direction and establishing priorities. Therefore, a realistic amount of board meeting time needs to be spent reviewing the progress of the organisation and discussing and approving fiscal documents and programme plans. Because the board's decisions are so central to the NGO, it is even more imperative that a full agenda and supporting materials are available for board review well in advance of scheduled meetings.

Although every board member may not read all material distributed prior to the meeting, the session should be conducted on the assumption that *all* members have read *all* materials. The presiding officer should keep in mind that each member will probably have a special interest in at least one agenda item and will therefore be well prepared for that particular discussion.

The chairperson of the meeting needs to carefully think about each agenda item before the session, considering why each item of business is there and what is the anticipated board involvement -- e.g., certain items are on the agenda for information purposes only, while others will require board consideration and disposition. It is not always possible to predict which items will be acted on quickly and which will generate extensive debate. *Often times the smaller the item, the greater the attention it will be given.* For example, the governing board may quickly approve the budget for a major biodiversity programme initiative but become bogged down in a discussion of letterhead styles. The reason is that members may not feel they are biodiversity experts, but everyone can have an opinion on stationery. It is therefore advisable that a suggested timetable for agenda items be presented at the start of the meeting and adhered to as much as possible. It is also important that board members remember their function in meetings is to set direction, to approve, to guide -- but not to micro-manage.

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BOARD MEETINGS (continued from page 3)

If the NGO employs an executive director, the board should meet periodically in executive session to review the director's performance. At regular board meetings, paid staff in attendance should refrain from dominating the discussion. Their opinions and recommendations will generally carry more weight if board members have not been overwhelmed with technical details and jargon.

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF MEMBERS

The NGO's annual general meeting should be exciting and stimulating and should provide a significant boost to the organisation's major programme activities. In addition to the guidelines discussed elsewhere in this newsletter, there are other considerations that apply to the AGM.¹

- The AGM is an important time for the voting/dues-paying membership to become involved in and informed about the NGO's future plans. It is a good time to treat members as if each is an important part of the organisation.

- Provide enough time for everything that needs to be accomplished at the AGM. Do not attempt to cram the business session in at the end of the meeting without adequate time for a full discussion of important agenda items. Adopt a time schedule and stick to it! Be sure to leave time for questions, discussion and debate.

- Relate the theme of the meeting to the primary programme activities of the NGO. By opting for a catchy theme and speaker, AGM organisers often miss an excellent opportunity to really push the organisation's basic projects.

- Plan carefully for awards and recognition. The AGM is an appropriate time for the organisation to honor those who have served its cause (but be careful not to present so many awards that the meaning is diminished).

- If possible, select interesting and/or unusual meeting locations.

- Work hard at promoting attendance, with early mailings to members and personal invitations to potential contributors or programme sponsors.

- Take advantage of as many publicity/news media opportunities as are available in your community to promote the meeting. Don't forget to contact the media **after** the AGM to report on the presentations of key speakers, actions approved by the membership, and future initiatives to be undertaken by the NGO.

- Spread the workload. One reason an annual meeting may not achieve its potential is that the event is left in the hands of too few, already over-stretched officers or staff persons. In a small organisation, the AGM is the kind of activity in which **all** board members should be involved.

¹ Most of these are discussed in more detail in an informative book by Brian O'Connell, *Effective Leadership in Voluntary Organizations* (Walker and Company, New York, 1976), which was used as a primary source in the preparation of this NGO Technical Bulletin.