

Tips and Strategies for Groups

What makes meetings effective?

All effective meetings have one thing in common: a good facilitator, or in other words, a good leader. The role of the facilitator may be filled by any group member, but the president or chairperson of the group usually leads the meeting.



Tips for Effective Meetings

1. Be prepared as a group.
2. Start and end on time.
3. Have the information needed to make decisions.
4. Make sure you are not missing someone who is critical to the discussion.
5. Follow a meeting agenda which may include:

• **The opening**

- Welcome participants
- Introduce participants and yourself
- Set the tone and pace
- Go over and approve meeting objectives and the agenda
- Review minutes from previous meetings

• **The discussions and decisions**

- Keep the group on task
- Assess the group's interest level
- Clarify confusing discussions
- Provide feedback to the group
- Enforce ground rules

• **The conclusion**

- Identify next steps
- Evaluate the meeting

Families Ask Questions

What do you do when one person dominates or takes over the meeting discussion?

"It is the facilitator's role to make sure everyone has the opportunity to share. If the facilitator is allowing some members to speak more than others, you may want to ask another member for their thoughts. Say 'Ann, what are your ideas?' You could talk to the facilitator after the meeting and tell them what you think is happening and that it's not helpful."

-Marlea, parent

Consider this...

Good leaders give their group members clear direction. They keep their group on the right path. And they guide their group to reach goals.

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What improves group dynamics?

It is good practice for groups to reach out and welcome new members into their group. It is also good practice for groups to provide opportunities for all members to get to know each other better.



Groups may want to use these activities to improve group dynamics:

- Provide time on the agenda for members to share their story.
- Play 'name games' and 'ice breakers' that help everyone, especially new members, get to know each other and feel more comfortable.
- Provide orientation for new members and ongoing training for all members to continue to build their communication, collaboration, and decision-making skills.
- Provide background information in a 'member handbook' or group website.
- Use group email or other technology as an ongoing way to communicate.
- Help members discover what they have in common.

Understanding cultural norms

Some families have cultural norms that make it difficult for them to discuss conflicting ideas or to question professionals' decisions. They may not become engaged until they receive a specific invitation with clear instructions about how to be involved. (Henderson, 2007)

Some families may also come from cultures in which the need to preserve relationships is more highly valued than (their) individual rights. (Alliance, 2006)

Families Ask Questions

It seems impossible to memorize cultural variations because they are dynamic and changing. What are strategies groups can use to increase the participation of families from all diverse backgrounds?

1. Keep learning about the unique cultural values and beliefs of all the members of the group.
2. Take time to recognize and honor racial and ethnic variations.
3. Provide trained interpreters.
4. Limit the use of jargon.
5. Encourage members to mentor each other to build skills and confidence.

Consider this...

While there has been much progress in building collaboration, a real or perceived knowledge imbalance between families and professionals still hinders progress. (Alliance, 2008)

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What is two-way communication?

Families are busy and may not be aware that their input can make a difference. There are many ways information can be shared. When communication goes both ways, this is called *two-way communication*.



Here are some examples of two-way communication.

Family Surveys

Surveys invite input on new initiatives. Provide surveys on paper at open houses with an option of an online version. Random telephone surveys can take families by surprise. When you call, offer more time and offer to call back at a later time.

Family Centers

Centers in the community or school are important places because they send a welcoming message that families are important partners, especially in the school environment. Centers may offer brochures and fliers, as well as a comfortable place for small groups of families to talk informally with family representatives, staff and each other.

Town Meetings

Community centers or public libraries may be more comfortable for families who are accustomed to attending events out in their neighborhood. Town meetings provide an opportunity for families and community leaders to have an open conversation about issues unique to their community.

'Breakfast with the Principal' (or Policymaker)

Informal meetings around a simple meal provide an opportunity to become better acquainted and provide time for staff to get feedback from families on programs and services.

Public Listening Sessions

Before important decisions are made, decision-making groups may set aside time on the agenda for citizens to share their input. Whenever possible, post meeting notices and agendas well in advance so that the public is aware of the topics and can prepare. Typically, the group will ask citizens to complete a comment form and return it to one of the group members. Citizens may decide to speak to the group or they may wish for their comments to be read to the group.

Home-School Notes

Teachers can use a notebook to send important information home to families and to answer questions. Families can share concerns and write their questions in the notebook and send it back to school.

Putting It Into Action

As new members of the Reading Improvement Committee, John and Laura knew very little of each other or the other members. To improve group dynamics, the committee took time at the beginning of each meeting for members to share out with the group. There would be a different question or topic each month.

As part of two-way communication between the committee and the public, the Reading Improvement Committee surveyed school staff, students, and families. They also posted all meeting minutes in the school, public library, and community center.

