

Co-operantics

Co-operative skills for everyone

Three Tools for Effective Meetings

1. The Facilitator

The role of the Facilitator is crucial to the running of an effective meeting. It's the job of the Facilitator to guide the meeting through the agenda, ensuring that each item gets discussed and that the meeting ends on time.

The Facilitator has various responsibilities during the meeting:

- if required, to prioritise agenda items, allocating time to each
- to make sure that no one person dominates the meeting and that everyone has the chance to speak
- to build on agreement and move the discussion along
- to briefly clarify the issues or positions of various parties, before the meeting attempts to come to an agreement
- to summarize what has been decided, making sure that everyone agrees (this helps the minute-taker)
- to allocate tasks, making sure that responsibility for action is clear and recorded.

Of course although it is the Facilitator's responsibility to see that these things happen, it is also the responsibility of everyone present at the meeting to support the Facilitator.

The Facilitator and the minute taker should work together - it helps if they are sitting next to one another - to ensure that the minutes are a correct record of decisions taken and action agreed.

2. The Agenda

The Agenda is really nothing more than a list of items to be discussed at the meeting, but who prepares it, what items get on to it and in what order have a powerful influence over what happens during the meeting and what decisions get taken.

Wherever possible, the Agenda should be prepared and circulated in advance of the meeting. This enables members to inform themselves of the items to be discussed. Some co-operatives stick up a sheet of paper on the noticeboard so that members can write up items they'd like to discuss at the next meeting, others might use email or an online platform to do the same thing; others agree an Agenda at the beginning of the meeting, others leave it to the Facilitator and Secretary. It's important that whatever method you choose, people know how to get topics they want discussed onto the Agenda.

Co-operantics

Co-operative skills for everyone

The order in which items appear is crucial. Be sure and put the important items early on in the Agenda, people get tired towards the end of a meeting and you'll want people's attention and energy focused on the important issues.

Some people include 'Any Other Business' (AOB) as the last item on the Agenda. If you do, remember this item should only be used for relatively unimportant matters. If the Facilitator considers that an AOB item needs more extensive discussion than time permits, then discussion should be postponed to another meeting.

It's helpful to indicate whether Agenda items are for:

- information,
- discussion or
- decision

The Agenda often follows a standard format:

- Apologies for absence
- Minutes of the last meeting – are they a correct record?
- Matters arising from the minutes (that aren't already on the Agenda)
- Agenda items 1, 2, 3, etc.
- AOB
- Date & time of the next meeting

3. The Minutes

The minutes are a record of decisions made at the meeting. It's important that decisions made are recorded, since otherwise they may get forgotten or misrepresented later. They provide a source of reference and an authority for all those involved in the meeting. They should be checked by everyone at the subsequent meeting and amended if necessary. Note as a record of decisions agreed by everyone, they must not be amended by individuals between meetings.

Taking minutes involves the skills of comprehension, selection of information and summarising.

We recommend using Action minutes, which record a brief summary of the discussion, the decisions made and the action to be taken, together with the name of the person responsible and a target date if necessary. It's not helpful to try to record what everyone has said, because (a) you can't and (b) what you hear may not be precisely what the speaker intended, so if you try you risk squandering hours in unproductive arguments over what

Co-operantics

Co-operative skills for everyone

somebody did or didn't say. The only exception might be if people wish to keep a record of a particularly polarised or difficult discussion.

It helps to have a column on the right-hand side of the page, for recording the names of those responsible for delegated tasks and possibly target dates. This helps the Facilitator to quickly identify 'Matters arising' at the start of the subsequent meeting.

Minutes often follow a standard format:

- Date of the meeting
- Names of those present
- Names of those not present who have sent their apologies
- Confirmation that the previous meeting's minutes have been agreed
- Any amendments to the previous meeting's minutes
- Decisions relating to matters arising from the previous meeting's minutes
- Decisions relating to Agenda items listed in the order in which they are taken at the meeting
- Decisions relating to AOB
- Date & time of the next meeting

Minutes should be circulated to members as soon as possible after the meeting. This is because they are a record of the tasks that have been delegated, so not much use if people don't receive them till the night before the next meeting!

Once agreed at the subsequent meeting as a correct record they should be filed for future reference.