

Workshop Five

EFFECTIVE GROUP MEETINGS

Objective

- To analyze the structure of effective group meetings and understand how to design a meeting agenda that supports a group's community action goals.

Outcomes

- Participants will be able to analyze the components of an effective meeting.
- Participants will practice and be able to create meeting agendas to support community action groups.
- Participants will be able to evaluate, assess and review meeting effectiveness.

I. Welcome and Discussion of Workshop Four Homework

(15 minutes)

Check in with group members and see how everyone is doing. Ask participants to share some of the experiences that they had practicing active listening and I-Messages. Give people an opportunity to share some of the challenges and funny things that happened as they practiced. Acknowledge that these communication skills do not come naturally to most of us, and that beginning to incorporate them into our daily lives often takes practice and increased reflection and awareness.



POINTER – When reviewing the homework, it is sometimes helpful to go around the room to determine how each participant fared with the I-Message practice. Ask what worked well and explore any difficulties people may have experienced. Check to see if anyone received negative feedback from others as they practiced. Discuss the source of the negative feedback about the use of I-Messages.

II. Agenda Review

(5 Minutes)

Review the agenda. Point out that running effective meetings is a highly skilled task, and that this session will focus on three major

themes—analyzing the structure of effective meetings, developing agendas that help to frame action-focused meetings, and tools for evaluating the effectiveness of community action meetings.

POINTER – Point out that while group styles differ, the basic skills associated with effective groups meetings cut across all groups. This session is an opportunity to develop these skills for future use in all settings where group interaction is critical to getting a task done.



III. Effective Meetings: A Brainstorming Activity

(20 minutes)

Begin by providing a short introduction on meetings and their purposes. You may choose to use the following mini-lecture to set the tone for this activity:

As we know, all organizations and groups have meetings. It is important to focus on meetings because, in our public lives, meetings are where we work together to make our world a better place for our families, our children and our communities.

The Spanish word for meeting is reunion; in other words, meetings are a “joining together again.” The fact that meetings join people together demonstrates the principle of the Free to Grow initiative we are all involved in: Problems are solved when people join together.

This mini-lecture is an opportunity to talk about some of the group experiences that have worked well or caused problems in your work. Consider noting that all facilitators, including you, have had meetings go well and go poorly. After the brainstorming exercise on “Qualities of Good Meetings” and discussion of the critical components of “Running an Effective Meeting,” share aspects of your experiences in relation to the key concepts. For example, the following is a story shared by a fellow community action group facilitator:

EXAMPLE

At one point in my work, I was asked to chair a group that was exploring the development of a local ordinance that would allow for the inspection of rental property. This happened in a community that had a large number of rental properties that owners had allowed to deteriorate. Landlords would frequently rent property to people without credit checks and insist in payment in cash. Living conditions were often deplorable and, on a daily basis, put the families at risk for health and safety problems.

The group I was facilitating was composed of local residents, members of the Chamber of Commerce, Realtors, the Police Department and other interested individuals. The group had about 15 members, all with an agenda to put forward. In general, there were those who wanted an ordinance and those who attended with the sole purpose of killing any attempt to regulate rental housing. I wanted a rental ordinance and thus was not an unbiased facilitator. In this case I made three critical mistakes:

- 1) not creating agendas with sufficient detail;*
- 2) not establishing ground rules about how we would interact with each other; and*
- 3) attempting to move my agenda as opposed to seeking a compromise that all could live with.*

The result of these mistakes was a group in chaos. I was unable to help the members find a resolution to the rental issue before the process self-destructed.

Your example will obviously be different. But the idea is to find ways to integrate your experiences into the content of the session.

Problems don't get solved overnight. Also, when you do solve a problem, there are usually many other problems that need to be addressed next. Meetings are a process—groups continue to “join together again” to clarify their problems, understand the causes of those problems and build the power to implement solutions to those problems. Within each meeting, then, there is the “seed” to the next meeting.

Different types of organizations have different types of meetings. Meetings can be about changing conditions in our world (environmental groups), meetings can be about dealing with how we feel or cope with situations or experiences in our lives (support groups), meetings can be about fellowship and fun (sports groups), and meetings can be about maintaining the organizations we participate in for whatever reason (school budget meetings). Often, groups have each of these types of meetings within them (faith organizations).

What is the purpose of our FTG organization? Probe participants to come up with

answer. If our primary focus is to strengthen our communities against the impact of substance abuse and other high risk activities, then our meetings need to reflect that purpose.

Have the group members brainstorm the qualities of good meetings that they have attended. List the qualities as people raise them. To facilitate the thinking in this exercise, you might want to probe some of the following issues after the initial brainstorm:

- leadership
- participatory roles
- time of meetings
- location of meetings
- length of meetings
- decision making
- number of people attending meetings
- socializing at meetings

Running an Effective Meeting

- **Rooms should be set up in a way that is conducive to interaction.** Use circles of chairs as opposed to lecture style. For large groups, circular tables allow you to move people into small groups that can facilitate discussion and eye contact. Formal public meetings, however, might be set up with a podium and rows of chairs, as long as those interacting with the audience can be easily seen.
- **Introductions should always be made.** Introductions are important even with an established group—unless all people in the room already know each other. It is respectful and inviting to new members to take the time to introduce everyone
- **Choose a pleasant and convenient place for a meeting.** A good meeting place makes people feel welcomed. Try to have refreshments, as well as an opportunity for people to talk informally before and after the meeting. For example, you might want to let people know that the meeting will start at 6:00, but that a social time will begin at 5:45, etc. Also, if there are “turf” issues in your community, try to hold meetings on “neutral” ground or agree to rotate meetings around the community.
- **Develop a meeting agenda that has a beginning, middle and end.** There should be sufficient time to raise an issue, discuss it, plan action steps and assign responsibilities
- **Establish a meeting time and length—and stick to it.** Before the meeting, analyze your agenda to ensure that adequate time has been allocated for the work that is listed. If the agenda is too long, shorten it and move some items to the next meeting. If an item on the agenda is taking longer than was projected, get buy-in from the group members to run over for a specific length of time to complete the meeting’s tasks
- **Review group ground rules and facilitate the meeting in a way that these ground rules are continually reinforced.** The ground rules should include an agreement to listen to one another, not to interrupt or to judge the opinions expressed. People should speak in I-Messages and have the opportunity to participate equally—as well as the right to pass. Discussion should be facilitated in a way that encourages openness and a willingness to share. People should respect requests for confidentiality.
- **Build rapport and elicit participant resourcefulness.** Build on people’s expertise, give the group opportunity to take ownership of meeting agenda—by modifying, changing it. Take the time to build consensus. Identify multiple opportunities to give all group members responsibility for the work of the group.
- **Most of the work of an effective meeting takes place between meetings.** Make sure to follow-up on the work that was to be done, and to review members’ roles in the next meeting before the meeting takes place.
- **Make sure that meetings lead to actual work being accomplished and do not become an end unto themselves.** Getting something done rewards group members and gives them a reason to come back.

Once the brainstorm has been completed, give out Handout #1 on running effective meetings and review it with the group. (The text of the handout is included here for reference.) Talk about each of the issues listed and, if possible, give examples. Encourage the group to ask questions.

IV. Review and Discussion of the Structure of an Action Agenda

(30 minutes)

Even when a group has developed some good potential leaders, those leaders will not be able to be effective if the group's work and meetings are not structured well. One of the most important tools for giving structure to a meeting is formulating an agenda that defines the work of the meeting and moves the meeting forward towards the desired end point.

Explain that during the course of their community work, the group will hold different kinds of meetings: meetings of their own community action group; meetings with government or agency representatives to discuss particular community issues; community-wide meetings as part of a campaign or to celebrate a victory; meetings with a variety of individuals to gather information on a particular issue. Each of these meetings requires a well structured agenda. Using Handout #2, review the qualities of an effective meeting agenda with the group.

An effective meeting agenda:

- Helps to frame the work of a meeting so that the goals for that meeting are accomplished.
- Establishes an introduction to the issues to be dealt with, a time for discussion, questions, and consensus building, and assures that next steps are determined and assigned before the meeting is adjourned.
- Establishes specific amounts of time for each item to be discussed and identifies the person responsible for presenting on a particular issue.
- Engages a range of members of the group in the work of the meeting.
- Is developed and reviewed before the meeting takes place so that everyone involved in running the meeting know their roles and responsibilities.

The meeting agenda is like a contract between the leader and group members. It is important for participants to understand that a well developed agenda is an anchor for the group leader and members as they work through complex issues that can go in unplanned directions. An effective agenda also serves to point out the work that should be completed in the group meeting and helps to distribute the work among all group members.

Too often group leaders fail to allocate time for designated agenda items or extend designated time limits but without permission from the group. This creates a sense that the agenda is not real and the leader can't be trusted to honor the implicit contract.

In the case of Sample Agenda Two on page 5-6, it is important to link the agenda to the story of the community group. Using the sample agenda provided, point out that the group's success in getting a response from the liquor control board was, in large measure, due to the effectiveness of the meeting that was held with officials. An effective agenda was key to the meeting's success.

Write up the following two agendas on a chart tablet, and review them with the group to give them examples of what well structured meeting agendas might look like. Point out that some agendas look very different from others because the goals of the meeting are quite different. Use the two agendas included below to help illustrate these differences. Point out the similarities and differences between the agendas—time sequencing, assignments, devel-

opmental process. Note that the community action group meeting was a relatively open meeting based on allowing lots of time for discussion, so there was a certain openness to the agenda while the second meeting was a more formal public meeting with less time on the agenda for discussion and consensus building—emphasize that the goal of the meeting was to elicit certain commitments from public officials, and so the meeting was tightly scripted.

**SAMPLE MEETING AGENDA ONE:
Community Action Group Meeting**

The agenda below reflects an early meeting of a newly formed community action group. Members of this group have completed the leadership development training and have just carried out a community-led neighborhood assessment. The analysis of their community assessment has just been completed. The following meeting was the first meeting of the group after all members had received copies of the results for review. Group members now want the opportunity to review the results together, discuss them, and begin to identify issues to frame their work together. The meeting below is intended to begin this process.

BEDFORD STUYVESTANT FREE TO GROW PROJECT
COMMUNITY ACTION GROUP MEETING
September 25, 1999

- 7:00 P.M. Welcome and Introductions
Angie Diamond, Group Chair

- 7:15 P.M. Presentation of Community Assessment Findings
Arthur Murray
D. Anne Jones

- 7:30 P.M. Group Discussion of Community Assessment
Facilitated by Angie Diamond, Group Chair

- 8:00 P.M. Identifying Priority Areas for Our Work Together
Shaniqua Miller, Group Co-Chair

- 8:30 P.M. Next Steps
Shaniqua Miller, Group Co-Chair

- 8:45 P.M. Assignment of Follow-up Tasks
Angie Diamond

- 9:00 P.M. Adjourn/Socialization and Refreshments

SAMPLE MEETING AGENDA TWO:

A Community-wide Meeting Designed to Move Forward an Action Campaign

The following agenda was actually used by a community group dealing with a neighborhood bar. The bar was the source of a very high crime rate in the neighborhood.

VAN BRUNT COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION MEETING WITH OFFICIALS REGARDING DRUG RELATED CRIMES

August 10, 1991

Chairperson: Christine Miller Timekeeper: Ric Francka

- 7:00 Welcome — *Rev. Mark Perruca*
- 7:02 Overview — *Rose Germann*
- 7:07 Rules of the Day — *Mariette Pacheco*
- 7:08 Attendance — *Kim Jongenelen*
- 7:10 Research — *George Albertson*
- 7:20 Testimony — *Nick Santi, Susanne Nichols, Rev. Mark Perruca*
- 7:30 Response from County Prosecutor — *Albert Stevenson*
- 7:36 Questions for County Prosecutor — *Hugh Art*
- Will you send a letter to the owner of Bob's Bar and Grill to advise them of the suspected illegal activity and their liability under the state nuisance law?
 - Will you coordinate and use all possible tools at the government's disposal to deal with the problem?
 - Will you meet with us again in 2 months?
- 7:38 Response from Police Chief — *Larry Rieder*
- 7:44 Questions for Police Chief — *Linda Shipman*
- Will you direct your special narcotics unit to investigate our drug sales problem?
 - Will you ensure that officers will protect confidentiality when responding to calls?
 - Will your department cooperate in the ticketing and towing of vehicles illegally parked in the Van Brunt Baptist Church parking lot at 39th & Van Brunt?
 - Will you meet with us again in 2 months?
- 7:46 Response from Assistant City Manager — *Fred Shippy*
- 7:52 Questions for Assistant City Manager — *Alice Palmer*
- Will the liquor control department conduct a food audit on Bob's Bar and Grill?
 - Will the health department conduct inspections of Bob's Bar and Grill and enforce health codes if violations are present?
 - Will you direct your departments to cooperate with the prosecutor's office in addressing any illegal drug activity uncovered?
 - Will you meet with us again in 2 months?
- 7:55 Next Steps — *Christine Miller*
- 7:59 Closing Prayer — *Rev. Mark Perruca*

Background Information Regarding Meeting Agenda Two

Drug sales, gambling and prostitution were all present in this bar. A church was located next door to the bar and after services had concluded one Sunday morning, the congregation had a picnic in their parking lot. Two patrons in the bar got into a fight and one patron chased the other patron out of the bar and shot him with a handgun in the church parking lot. The victim was killed. With this event, the community finally decided to act on this neighborhood problem.

According to liquor licensing laws, if at least 50 percent of Sunday's sales receipts were for food rather than alcohol, a Sunday license could be maintained. However, the group found that this bar sold almost no food. This bar had also failed its last four health inspections.

The community group originally requested that the liquor control department conduct a food audit of Bob's Bar. The group was told they could not have an audit because there was only one city employee conducting these audits and that individual was too busy. The group also requested that the narcotics unit investigate drug sales in the bar. They were told that the narcotics unit would not investigate because this bar was not a "major" drug source in the city.

In the face of these refusals, this community group held a public meeting to demand that existing laws be enforced on this bar. The meeting was attended by 240 residents, public officials and media. Each specific demand was agreed to by the invited officials. Bob's Bar lost its Sunday liquor license six weeks later after the food audit determined that less than five percent of Sunday's receipts applied to food sales. Three months later, the owner of this establishment was arrested by state officials on gambling charges. The gambling investigation was launched at the urging of police after this public meeting.

BREAK

15 minutes

V. Practicing Creating Meeting Agendas

(30 minutes)

Break the group into small groups of five to six members. Type the meeting scenarios described below on separate sheets of paper and distribute one to each group. (You may also want to write your own scenarios if there are particular meeting types that you would like to review with the group.)

Have each group develop an agenda for the meeting scenario they receive. Point out that before they start, they should review the key principles of an effective agenda (see handout #2) and determine the goals and objectives of the meeting. This may require creating a "story" that has brought the group to the point where the sample meeting below is about to be held. Filling out the structure of that story before developing an agenda may help determine what the meeting structure needs to look like. Remind group members that a meeting agenda should reflect the meeting's overall goals and expected outcomes. Group members should work to clearly identify how the meeting steps will facilitate the outcomes sought.

POINTER – Be sure to point out that the most common mistake when developing agendas is omitting sufficient detail. To develop a detailed meeting agenda, it is helpful to begin with the desired outcome and work backwards step by step. Encourage the small groups to add too much detail; it is always easier to delete extraneous information.



As participants work on their scenarios, float among the groups asking questions designed to point out gaps in the flow of the agenda that each small group is developing. Does each agenda item set up the next and move toward the final anticipated outcome? Look for holes in the flow of the logic from one item to the next and use questions to help members plug the gaps themselves. For example, in scenario three, the following agenda would contain a number of gaps:

- 7:00 Introductions and Welcome (*Mary*)
- 7:05 Overview (*George*)
- 7:10 Ground Rules (*Pete*)
- 7:15 Questions of the School
Superintendent (*Suzanne*)

The beginning of this agenda lacks a critical element—the research phase of the problem and the reporting back to the group on the findings. The problem has not yet been defined in the example given, and this definition must occur before engaging the superintendent. You do not need to point out all the problems to the small groups, as the full group will benefit from doing an analysis of scenarios other than their own. However, it is important that each group begin to understand the process concretely. It may also be helpful to encourage participants to discuss how this exercise changed their thinking about the agendas that they may already work with in their Head Start, PTA or other community meetings.

Give each group 30 minutes to develop their agenda.

Sample Meeting Scenarios for Distribution to Groups for Agenda Exercise

- 1) Your community group has identified drug sales in abandoned houses as an issue you want to address. You have been assigned the job of planning for a meeting with the police department so that your group can begin to understand the scope of the problem and what can be done to improve the situation. Develop a detailed agenda for the meeting with a police department official as your group's invited guest.
- 2) Your community organization is just getting started. You have a core group of committed residents, but at your last meeting you decided as a group that your organization needs to get to know others in the community and expand your members. The purpose of your upcoming meeting is to develop a strategy for reaching out to other community residents, specifically through understanding how substance abuse problems are affecting these residents. You need to plan for this next meeting. Develop a detailed agenda that supports this meeting's purpose.
- 3) Your community group has been working on getting a drug prevention curriculum introduced into the schools. For seven months, the school district has been unresponsive to your requests to consider this program. Plan for a meeting between your group and the Superintendent of Schools during which your group is going to demand that she implement a drug prevention curriculum. Develop a detailed agenda for this meeting.
- 4) Your community coalition has been working on youth access to alcohol. Both the residents of your neighborhood and the police acknowledge that there are several liquor stores that sell to minors. The police used to crack down on this, but the County Attorney does not prosecute these cases. You are planning for the first meeting between your coalition and the County Attorney. Develop a detailed agenda for this meeting.

VI. Sharing and Analysis of Meeting Agendas (60 minutes)

Pull all groups together to share what they did. Have groups review the scenarios and share the agendas that they developed. Discuss each agenda and solicit input from the group. Have the large group analyze whether the proposed agenda would help to move forward the action that the group intends to take. Allow the large group to make suggestions for modifications on the proposed agendas, and point out why those modifications might strengthen the meeting structure.

Encourage the full group to engage in the kind of analysis that you modeled as you floated among the groups asking questions and pointing out gaps in flow. Ask groups members if they see any steps that could be added to each scenario. If the group misses a critical point, ask a question such as “How did we get from research to outcome so quickly?” or “How do we know what the problem is?” Your goal is to get participants to analyze and then solve the problems.

VII. Evaluating a Meeting—Some Closing Thoughts (15 minutes)

Point out that having effective meetings is a skill that takes time to master. Note that as the

Sometimes it is hard for members to evaluate a meeting because they do not want to hurt the leader’s feelings or fear that feedback will create the impression that a member is too critical and not a team player. Ask members if they have reservations about engaging in evaluation and see if group members can address any concerns that arise. Step in whenever necessary to ensure that all identified concerns are addressed by the group.

group moves forward, it is important to evaluate how their meetings are going. Review the Meeting Checklist (Handout #3) and note that throughout your work together, you will be using this tool to evaluate your meetings.

VIII. Workshop Five Homework

Have group members pick a community meeting that will to be held in the next week and arrange to attend. (Group members can team up if they wish.) Possible meetings include a Head Start meeting, a PTA meeting, a church group meeting, a local planning board or a general meeting of any community-based organization or advocacy group. Group members should observe the meeting and then assess it according to the evaluation criteria listed on the Meeting Checklist. Ask them to write up the things that the meeting did well as well as those things that could have been improved. Ask members to come prepared to discuss their observations at the next training session.

POINTER – Facilitators should research community meetings and provide a list to participants at the end of this session. Have people form teams before they leave the room and commit to attend one of these community meetings. This enhances buy-in, and increases the likelihood that group members will carry out the assignment. This approach will also give you the opportunity to encourage group members to attend and observe a variety of community meetings. Be sure to point out that participants should use the meeting checklist to evaluate the meeting after they attended.



If Your Community Action Group Is Already Up and Running

In ongoing rounds of training, consider changing the examples used for practicing forming meeting agendas to coincide with the types of meetings that your community action group is currently planning. Also, have training participants work with community action group leaders and the group facilitator to observe the agenda development process in action. Consider using agendas of past community action meetings to analyze the qualities of successful and unsuccessful agendas.

For the homework assignment, consider sending training participants to meetings that are discussing issues that are relevant to the community action work that your group is currently undertaking. For example, if your group is trying to address the issue of access to alternative activities for children after school, be sure to send training members to observe school district meetings, meetings of local providers of after-school activities (solicit invitations on their behalf) or of the local Youth Council. In this way, training participants will be able to bring back valuable information to the community action group while observing group process.

WORKSHOP FIVE

Handouts

Workshop Five – Handout #1

Running Effective Meetings

- ◆ **Rooms should be set up to promote interaction**, e.g., circles of chairs as opposed to lecture style. If it is a large group, circular tables that allow you to move people into small groups that can facilitate discussion and eye contact are preferable. Formal public meetings, on the other hand, can be set up with a podium and rows of chairs, as long as those interacting with the audience can be easily seen.
- ◆ **Introductions should always be done**, even with an established group. Unless all people in the room already know each other, it is respectful and inviting to new members to take the time to introduce everyone.
- ◆ **Choose a pleasant and convenient place for a meeting** where people feel welcomed. Try to provide refreshments, as well as an opportunity for people to talk informally before and after the meeting. For example, let people know that the meeting will start at 6:00, but that a social time will begin at 5:45. Also, if there are “turf” issues in your community, try to hold meetings on “neutral” ground or agree to rotate meetings around the community.
- ◆ **Develop a meeting agenda that has a beginning, middle and end.** Allot time to raise an issue, discuss it, plan action steps and assign responsibilities.
- ◆ **Establish a meeting time and length then stick to it.** At the same time, analyze the agenda before the meeting to make sure that adequate time has been allocated for all items. If the agenda is too long, shorten it and move some items to the next meeting. If an item on the agenda is taking longer than was projected, get buy-in from group members to extend the meeting for a specified length of time and carry over remaining items to the next meeting.
- ◆ **Review group ground rules and reinforce them throughout the meeting.** Common ground rules include: agreeing to listen to one another, not to interrupt, or to judge one another’s opinions; speaking in I-Messages; having an opportunity to participate equally as well as the right to pass; encouraging openness and a willingness to share; and respecting requests for confidentiality.

- ◆ **Build rapport and elicit participant resourcefulness.** Build on people's expertise. Give group members opportunities to take ownership of the meeting agenda by modifying or changing it. Take time to build consensus. Identify multiple opportunities to give all group members responsibility for the work of the group.
- ◆ **Most of the work of an effective meeting takes place between meetings.** Make sure to follow up on the work that was to be done and review members' roles in the next meeting before the meeting takes place.
- ◆ **Make sure that meetings lead to actual work being accomplished and do not become an end in themselves.** Getting something done rewards group members and gives them a reason to come back.

Workshop Five – Handout #2

Developing Effective Meeting Agendas

An effective meeting agenda:

- ◆ Helps to frame the work of a meeting so that the goals for that meeting are accomplished.
- ◆ Establishes an introduction to the issues to be dealt with, a time for discussion, questions, and consensus building, and assures that next steps are determined and assigned before the meeting is adjourned.
- ◆ Establishes specific amounts of time for each item to be discussed and identifies the person responsible for presenting on a particular issue.
- ◆ Engages a range of members of the group in the work of the meeting.
- ◆ Is developed and reviewed before the meeting takes place, so that everyone involved in running the meeting know their roles and responsibilities.

Workshop Five – Handout #3

Meeting Checklist

- Did everyone receive a copy of a written agenda in advance?
- Were copies of the agenda available for everyone or was there a large piece of newsprint in the front of the room with the agenda written on it?
- Did the meeting begin and end on time (so members with families and other responsibilities could plan their time)?
- Did the group stick to the agenda and accomplish what was planned?
- Was the organization credentialed in the meeting (why we are here, history of the issue, justification of the organization)?
- Was there a logical progression and flow among the meeting topics discussed?
- If tension arose during the meeting, how was it resolved?
- Did people feel welcome and valued? Were group members given an equal opportunity to participate?
- Were routine reports kept brief? Did the group members reporting have their comments written up and prepared before the meeting?
- Was prime time given to planning further action on important issues and/or projects?
- Did those running the meeting make time for announcements, special requests, etc., at the beginning or the end of the meeting?
- Were members of the group treated with respect, despite differences in viewpoint, age, experience, sex, race, ethnicity, income and formal education?
- Did the group assign responsibilities and follow-up activities for each decision made? Were there clear tasks to be carried out before the next group meeting? Was the division of the tasks shared across a variety of group members?
- Did the group set plans and a tentative agenda for the next meeting?
- Did group leaders solicit feedback on the effectiveness of the meeting?
- Did the meeting help to build the community action group's organization?

