



## **Tips on Leading Successful Neighborhood Meetings**

*This flier has been prepared with neighborhood organizations in mind. However, these suggestions also apply to community meetings in unorganized neighborhoods.*

One of the key ways to attract and retain members in your neighborhood organization is to conduct well-run community meetings with topics relevant to the neighborhood and its residents. Here are a few tips for planning and facilitating a successful neighborhood meeting.

- Plan your meeting well enough in advance to give yourselves time to inform all of your neighbors about the meeting. Delivery of a flier door to door is the most effective single way to communicate an upcoming neighborhood meeting. Use other communications tools as well (see last bullet point).
- If possible, meet in a neutral place where you can set up chairs in a circle or semicircle so that everyone can see one another. Most neighborhoods meet at houses of worship, recreation centers and the like.
- Newcomers may hesitate to go to a meeting in someone's home, so use this venue option with care.
- Make sure your meeting is set for a time that is convenient to a majority of your neighbors.
- Plan your meeting well in advance. The organizer's rule of thumb: A one-hour meeting requires two hours of planning.
- If you have a special program or speaker, think about whether that should go first or if regular business should go first.
- Leaders should show up early to set up chairs and welcome early arrivals. Post direction signs so that newcomers can easily find your meeting as they approach a building and once inside.
- Involve as many people as possible in the meeting --- setting up, reports, task assignments, participation, refreshments, putting chairs away, etc. The most successful meetings are handled by more than one or two people.
- As neighbors come into your meeting space, capture their names and contact information on a sign-in sheet. Ask folks to fill out name tags.
- Never be discouraging about the number of people attending your meeting. Celebrate those who did show up.

- Begin and end on time.
- Welcome everyone and state that this is the (monthly) (quarterly) meeting of the Maple Street Neighborhood Action Group. Then say or read your mission statement — or the purpose of the meeting. Remember that some new folks might not understand what they have walked into. Others may need a reminder about the mission or purpose.
- At the very beginning of your meeting, ask everyone to introduce themselves briefly (name, address and perhaps one other detail, such as how long the person has lived in the neighborhood). This allows everyone to participate at least once in the meeting.
- Make sure everyone has the agenda. You can print hand-outs or put it on a large poster on the wall. Briefly go over the agenda and make sure there are no needed additions or changes. If there are, get the group's consent.
- By getting agreement on the agenda at the start of the meeting, the facilitator has the authority (exercised gently but firmly) to keep the meeting on track when discussion wanders off topic.
- The facilitator should keep the session moving. Handle one agenda item at a time; stay on subject. Allow enough time for discussion and then move on.
- Make sure the meeting is task-oriented and decision-oriented, so that people go away saying, "We got some things done tonight!"
- Whoever is facilitating the meeting --- it does not have to be the president --- should remain neutral, draw other people out, and share his or her ideas sparingly.
- Invest in an easel, large pads and magic markers so you can capture ideas and concerns for everyone to see and consider. When someone sees her idea written on the pad, she feels her idea is important to the group.
- Label one large sheet the "Idea Parking Lot." Say in advance that ideas or concerns that are off topic (not on the agenda) will be parked for consideration at a later time --- at the end of the meeting (if there is time), or at the next meeting, or as soon as possible. This allows the facilitator to honor these concerns (for later discussion) but to keep moving on the task at hand.
- Create an atmosphere where people will not be afraid to participate. If one person is dominating the discussion, ask if others who have not spoken would like to comment. Draw out the quiet folks: "Mary, you haven't said anything. We'd be interested in your views on this."

- Create a respectful atmosphere. Politely ask people not to carry on side conversations or conduct personal business in the middle of the meeting. Meetings do sometimes “get out of control” with everyone talking at once. The facilitator is responsible for restoring an orderly one-person-at-a-time discussion.
- Allow your members to make the key decisions, not just the leaders. Trust the group. If you don’t, people will leave thinking they have no say in the deliberations of the organization.
- Test for readiness to make a decision. “Are we ready to take a vote?” If more discussion is needed, keep talking. Sometimes agenda items have to be dropped to accommodate the extra time required by a difficult topic; advance planning helps determine how much time each topic will take.
- If you are facing a difficult discussion and decision, it’s okay to say in advance that it will be hard. Then, when you finish, celebrate your accomplishment. Stay positive. “We weren’t able to reach a decision tonight, but this was a frank discussion and we know what we need to work on for next month.”
- If you take a vote, the facilitator can ask if there is a motion on the issue at hand. If the motion is seconded, the facilitator can then allow for continued discussion. But when discussion is over, the facilitator must ask for a voice vote or a show of hands of those in favor of and against the motion. A motion and a second alone are not enough for a group decision!
- At the end of your agenda, if possible, allow enough time for folks --- especially newcomers --- to bring up topics that you had not anticipated (new business). If it’s a difficult or time-consuming topic, ask if it can wait until the next month’s agenda, or if the person will talk to the leadership after the meeting. Cultivate your newcomers; they could be tomorrow’s committee chairs or board members.
- At the end of your meeting, review the tasks that people are to accomplish before the next meeting. Does every task have someone to do it?
- Always think a step ahead. How will this meeting lead to the next activity? Will a committee have to meet before the next general meeting?
- Reach out to your neighbors before each meeting; otherwise, your numbers will dwindle. Do not depend on one mode of communication. Be sure your neighbors “get the message” in several ways: a newsletter or flier, reminder phone call, email message, and a sign announcing the next meeting, with date, time & place.

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