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Being involved in activist groups can mean spending a lot of time in meetings. Meetings are important - they're a space to make plans, get to know each other, and build on each others strengths, but they can also be long, tedious, frustrating and ineffective. However, there is plenty we can do to make meetings useful, enjoyable places to be, and it's important to get right, because we won't build movements that are accessible and empowering unless our meetings are! This short guide tries to outline some of the things we can do to make sure our meetings work for everyone.

Many activist groups use some model of consensus decision making to aid their decision-making process. We won't go into detail around consensus in this article, because there is an introduction to one model of consensus available here: <https://www.nonviolence.wri-irg.org/en/node/40512>

Facilitation

“Facilitators” are people who take on a particular role during meetings. Their job is to support the group to communicate well and make effective decisions. A facilitator will have good listening skills, energy and confidence, a good understanding of the issues and the group, and a commitment to supporting the group to work well together.

Facilitation is normally done by an individual or a small group of people (depending on the size of the group and the slength of the meeting), but effective meetings aren't just the responsibility of the facilitator – everyone in the group has a role to play in making sure meetings are useful and productive. Supporting the facilitator – by respecting their role and what they are trying to achieve – is good practise for a group. One way of developing this culture is sharing facilitation, having different people in the group take turns facilitating meetings, or parts of them.

Co-facilitation

Two facilitators can support each other through a meeting. While one focuses on the general flow of the meeting, the second “co-facilitator” can be keeping track of who is and isn't participating, take notes, or keep an eye on the time. If you are encouraging participants to put their hand up to indicate they want to speak, the co-facilitator can also keep track of who is next to speak, freeing up the first facilitator to listen to the nuance of the conversation. If the meeting is long, then facilitators can switch between different roles to allow each other time to rest.

When and where

The “when” and the “where” of a meeting is important – it can have a dramatic impact on who can participate.

Choosing a venue that's accessible – both in terms of it's location and for those with restricted mobility – are important considerations in meeting the needs of those attending the meeting. Does the venue have easy access for someone in a wheel chair, relevant toilet facilities, etc? Is the venue on good public transport lines, or is it going to be difficult for people who don't drive to get there? Be ready to listen and take advice from those attending your meeting about how accessible your space is, and be ready to make changes. It sounds obvious, but choose a venue that's big enough!

Choosing a time and day that works for as many members of your group is important as well. The considerations will be different for every group because people will have different work-life balances, childcare or other caring duties. It's important to think about different people's needs, and to be as flexible as possible. If your group meets regularly, changing the time to suit different people's needs can be one way of making sure as many people as possible can participate. If you always have your meetings on the same day/time, then it's likely someone will be repeatedly excluded from joining. Some people will prefer occasional long meetings (perhaps all day, or full weekends even), others will prefer shorter more regular meetings.

If it's difficult to find a time that everyone can easily manage, why not hold two meetings? One option is to organise into smaller working groups, that meet to discuss specific issues in detail before feeding back into the larger group. Organisers could also check-in with group members who struggle to make a meeting beforehand, to get their ideas or views on particular subjects, and make sure they are brought in to the discussion.

Have a clear aim, process and outcome

Why is the meeting being held? Stating this clearly at the start means everyone is working towards the same goal. If there are key decisions to be made, articulating these can help to focus everyone's mind on the task at hand, and makes it easier for the facilitator(s) to bring the discussion back to the key points if you end up going down a tangent.

As the meeting begins, talk through the agenda, explain how the meeting will unfold, and be clear on how decisions will be made. For example, if you are using consensus, explain the process and different people's roles within it. This means that those participating in the meeting knows what to expect, introduces new people to any systems and procedures they might not automatically know, and reminds regulars of the processes.

Some groups have ground rules, group agreements, or a safer spaces policy, and if yours does then going through these at the start can be a good way of reminding everyone of the kind of culture you want to promote.

Setting the agenda

Setting the agenda for the meeting is important – it determines what gets discussed. Some groups have a fixed agenda (they speak about the same things every time they meet), others create an agenda together at the start of the meeting, others have an individual or small group decide what the agenda for the meeting should be. It will depend on the nature of your group and the aims for the meeting on how the agenda is put together.

Make sure you're realistic about what is achievable in the time you have. How points can you reasonably expect to discuss in your allotted time? Prioritise the most important discussions early on, but make sure you still get to every item. If there are discussions which regularly get abandoned due to lack of time, perhaps put them to the top of the next meeting's agenda, to make sure they get covered. Give lots of space and time for action points and decision-making – this can often end up being left to the end of a meeting, and so rushed.

Set a clear start and end time for the meeting. If it clear that you are going to reach the allotted end time without discussing everything, allow the group to make a collective decision about how to proceed. Some people will find it much easier to stay longer than others, and it's not fair if people with other commitments regularly miss out on the end of the meeting.

What do people need to be able to participate?

Everyone has different needs, and it's easy to end up excluding people from our meetings because they don't expect to be able to meet their needs in the space. Are you aware of people who would want to take part in your group, but can't for some reason? Have you asked them what the group could do to make the space accessible to them?

There are lots of simple and creative things we can do to ensure people can participate in meetings. For example, a solidarity group for women refugees – many of whom were the primary carers for their children – was organised partly by a group of female students. They realised that having lots of children in the meeting made it hard for some of the women to focus on the discussions, while some of the mothers felt uncomfortable bringing their children into the space. The solution? The organisers asked some of their friends and partners to organise some simple childcare in the same space, with toys and activities, so that the women were able to focus on the meeting. Everyone was happy – the women got to focus on their meeting, the children got the lots of new activities from people who could give them their full attention, and the new volunteers got a couple of hours playing rather than working or studying!

Other ways of meeting people's needs are offering lifts or finding funds to pay for people's transport, making sure the venue is accessible for people with additional or specific needs, and having food or snacks available.

Supporting good communication

Some people love speaking in groups – they quickly make up their own mind, and are happy to share it. But this doesn't necessarily mean they have the best idea, or that their aren't other views in the room, and some people might feel very frustrated if they don't feel like they have been given the opportunity to participate. Here are some tools facilitators can use to encourage participation.

- Go rounds – ask the group to give their opinion in turn, without interruption or discussion by others. If someone does try to turn the go round into a discussion, be ready to step in and ask them to wait their turn. Go rounds are a good way of getting a sense of the range of views within the group.
- Subgroups – does everyone need to discuss everything? If you are planning an action or an event, or any project where smaller groups will take on different roles, there might come a point where people can break off into smaller groups to work on their particular job or action point. This gives more space for people to speak in detail about aspects of the groups work that are important to them (and avoid things that aren't!), and allows more detailed discussion on specific aspects of the project. It also spreads power away from people likely to dominate the space.
- Hands up! In larger meetings it can be useful to ask participants to put their hands up to indicate they want to speak. A co-facilitator can help keep track of who's turn it is to speak next.
- Share information beforehand. Some people find it easier to digest new information than others, especially if they have been in the group a long time, or are used to handling information. Sharing information beforehand, or starting with a short presentation (for example a treasurer or finance worker talking the group through the figures, rather than just handing out a print out and assuming everyone is able to digest it at the same rate) can help to bring everyone up to speed. Provide lots of times for

questions.

- If you feel someone is dominating the discussion, use statements and questions that direct others to speak, such as “thank you for contributions – what do other think of the idea?”
- Pull rank. Your job, as the facilitator, is to do everything in your power to facilitate an effective meeting. You've been given a role, a responsibility, and a certain amount of power. If it feels necessary, call out behaviour you think is inappropriate (either in the full meeting or during the break). If someone is behaving in a way that means the meeting isn't able to be effective – by talking over others, dominating the discussion, patronising other participants, or any number of other ways – then it is important it is addressed directly. Direct any intervention towards the *behaviour*, not targeting the individual as a person. Explain what it is you've observed (“I'm aware you have spoken a lot during this meeting”, for example), and then make a specific request to the individual or group (“so I'm going to ask you to wait until others have had chance to contribute”). Be clear, concise, and polite, and quickly move the meeting along.

Taking notes

Good notes or minutes mean the group can go back and check what was said at previous meetings. Notes shouldn't be too long, but should try to give an account of the meeting, and the opinions and views that moved the group towards a particular decision. Decisions themselves should be clearly articulated. Identify someone at the start of the meeting to take notes. Set a deadline for distributing the notes to the other members – distributing the notes is a key action point!

Action points!

The group has decided to do something – great! But how is it going to get done? What resources do they need, and how are they going to acquire them? Who is going to do the work?

Action points are a way of breaking down decisions into the concrete tasks that need to be done. They should include a clear statement of the task, and who is going to do it. An action point might also include a clear time frame for when the action should be completed.

Either the facilitator or the note taker can identify action points that spring up in the discussion, and go through these at the end of the meeting if they don't have an individual or group assigned to them.

Finishing the meeting

Ending meetings well is important. It's good to give a sense of closure, thanking people for coming and for any tasks that people have done through the meeting. Sometimes facilitators choose to have a go round (perhaps participants restating their action points, or something they will take from the meeting), or invite any last reflections.

It's important to finish on time, or at least not to get into a habit of meetings regularly running over – it's not fair on those who have to leave on time for long journeys home or because of other responsibilities.

Other important tasks include:

- agreeing the time and venue for the next meeting, and who will be doing tasks like facilitating, taking notes, and any other roles that are needed,
- restating any action points that members of the group agreed to take on,
- making sure you have the contact details for any new members, and have a plan for how they will receive the notes (for example, identifying who will be responsible for adding new members to email lists),
- clearing up the space you've used, washing up and putting away furniture.

A quick check list:

- Is someone – or a group of people – prepared to facilitate the meeting? Have they had time to prepare?
- Is someone prepared to take notes, and is there a plan for circulating them?
- Do you have an agenda, or a plan for how to create one at the start of the meeting? Is there enough time to cover all of the subjects?
- Is the meeting space accessible? Do you need to do anything to make sure everyone is able to fully participate in the meeting?
- Have you identified action points to take from the meeting, and who will do them?

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