



TB 017 - How to run a council meeting

A council meeting brings together people who are in charge of sharing information and making decisions (see TB016). In organizations, people often complain that they spend too much time in unproductive meetings. This handout presents the different skills needed for a successful council meeting and explains how to apply them. It follows on from the TB016 handout: "How to prepare a council meeting". It describes the functions to be fulfilled in a council meeting, the causes of failure and remedies, the first 10 minutes, reformulation techniques, how to deal with difficult participants and how to prepare a report. This handout can be used to conduct a team or unit council meeting (see TB010).



1. The functions to be fulfilled in a council meeting

In running a council meeting, there are always three main functions to be fulfilled:

- *The organizational function:* defining the objectives of the meeting, choosing the working method, equipping and arranging the meeting room, welcoming participants.
- *The production function:* analysing the problem at hand, summarising the progress of work, ensuring that discussions lead to conclusions.
- *The regulatory function:* facilitating discussion, sensing the group atmosphere, clarifying misunderstandings about the problem to be solved, noting interpersonal difficulties and helping to solve them.

In order to ensure that the different functions are fulfilled, three roles are needed:

- *The chairman:* deals with the organizational and regulatory functions.
- *The secretary:* helps the chairman, especially by keeping a record of the meeting.
- *Participants:* carry out the production function.

The chairman

The chairman serves the group by ensuring that the meeting is conducted appropriately. This person is neutral and does not intervene in the substance of the debate -only in how the debate is conducted. His/her tasks are to:

- prepare the agenda;
- prepare the framework of the meeting and working methods;
- help the group to concentrate on the subject by suggesting methods and procedures;
- make sure that each participant can express him/herself without being attacked or criticised;
- encourage all members of the group to participate and share speaking time;
- provide intermediate conclusions to help the debate to progress;
- ratify the decisions;
- ensure follow-up to the meeting (report, implementation of decisions).

If the usual chairman is too involved in the subject matter of a meeting, it is better to nominate an external moderator who can remain neutral and correctly fulfil the organisational and regulatory functions.

The secretary

This person is also neutral. His/her task is primarily to keep an accurate record of the meeting by:

- writing the group's ideas on a flip chart in view of everyone;
- noting the main points in a way that reflect what the participants said.

Participants

- Actively take part in the discussion;

- Help the moderator and the secretary to maintain a neutral position;
- Ensure that the ideas expressed are noted;
- Make suggestions concerning procedure;
- Determine the direction of the discussions.

2. The first 10 minutes

The first 10 minutes are crucial to the success of the meeting. Here are 7 important tasks that the chairman needs to fulfil during this critical phase:

Make the group feel at ease

- Welcome participants.
- Create a relaxed atmosphere that helps people to express themselves and listen to others.
- Manage the time available so as to reach the objectives. Remind participants of how long the meeting will last and present an outline of the meeting.

Establish the "rules of the game"

- Establish the reciprocal degree of freedom between the chairman and the group - will the chairman intervene in the debate? If so, how? What does he/she expect of the group? Just to share information? Opinions or advice? Decisions?

Organise the reporting procedure

- Propose or nominate a secretary; inform him/her of the subject of the meeting and the distribution list of the report.

Make sure everyone is on the same wavelength

- Remind participants of the meeting's objectives and agenda, and of the decisions to be made.
- Propose a plan and a working method and check that the group agrees (see TB003).
- List participants' expectations and ask if there are any other items to add.

Open the debate

- Make a short introduction and, going around the table, invite participants to speak.

3. Reformulation

During a meeting, group dynamics can produce phenomena that can lead to failure if they are not channelled and managed. Table 1 summarises the main difficulties and proposes solutions. However, in order to fulfil the regulatory function, the chairman should also be able to use a reformulation technique.

What does reformulation mean?

When a participant speaks, the chairman:

- notes the main points;
- reformulates, i.e. verbally summarises the main points;
- tries not to forget anything, nor to add, deform, interpret nor react to anything.

The effects of reformulation

Reformulation has positive effects on the chairman, the participant and the rest of the group.

- The chairman - improves his/her ability to listen, shows that he/she is attentive, encourages participation, verifies that he/she has understood, clarifies and summarises.
- The participant - hears a reflection of what he/she said, thinks whether this is what was intended and, if necessary, corrects either the idea itself or how it was formulated, feels listened to, feels encouraged to continue to take part.
- The group - follows the discussion more easily, understands the subject better, feels more secure in knowing that the chairman is attentive, feels encouraged to take part more actively.

When should the chairman reformulate what has been said?

- When he/she is not sure what the participant said.
- When the participant has made an important point which the group did not pay attention to or may have misunderstood.
- When there is a need to summarise the item discussed and move on to another item.

4. Dealing with difficult participants

There are always difficult participants in a group. They can be grouped into 3 categories:

- those who talk too much;
- those who do not say enough;
- those who are disruptive.

Those who talk too much

• The talkative person

Reformulate his/her ideas and ask the group what it thinks so as to enable the others to express themselves and thus open the discussion, or make him/her wait after having noted the idea.

- **The “know-it-all”**

He/she is always the first to speak on any point. Ask the group if anyone has a different opinion.

- **The person who strays from the subject**

Ask his/her opinion on the point being discussed...

Those who do not say enough

- **The person who has difficulty expressing him/herself**

Capture the main points of the ideas, help him/her to express them more clearly, reformulate what was said so as to encourage - not embarrass - the person.

- **The shy person**

Invite and encourage the person to speak and protect him/ her from criticism.

- **The person who feels that no one listens**

Offer praise to improve how the person is viewed by others and to make him/her feel more important.

- **Those who are uninterested**

Let them talk about their own experiences.

- **The person who is sleepy or daydreams**

Ask the person questions that will interest him/her and bring the person into the debate.

Those who are disruptive

- **The person who wants precise answers on details**

Use an example to illustrate why it is necessary to understand the general situation before dealing with details.

- **The person who is hostile and feels that meetings serve no purpose**

Give him/her an opportunity to shine, praise his/her experience.

- **The argumentative person**

This person is obsessed with details or procedures: ask the question in a different way, ask the group's opinion.

- **The person who asks delicate questions**

Suggest that it would be better to discuss the point at a later date or reply briefly to end the debate.

- **The aggressive person**

Stay calm, listen and reformulate the idea in non-aggressive terms. Show your esteem for any positive aspects and then invite him/her to listen to the others.

5. The report

The report represents the collective memory of the group. It must be sent to everyone invited to the meeting (including those who were absent) and also to any other people involved.

Types of report

The chairman needs to determine the type of report needed before the meeting. There are two types of report:

- **Minutes**

These are a complete record of what everyone said. They are mainly used for statutory meetings (general assembly, board meeting, or steering committee).

- **Summary of conclusions**

This does not reflect all of the discussions but simply the main points and the intermediary and final summaries.

Preparing the report

The secretary takes notes during the meeting. He/she notes on a flip chart the main stages of the meeting and the intermediary summaries or conclusions as proposed by the chairman. If the chairman was not able to make intermediary summaries during the discussions, the meeting was not run appropriately and the records will be mediocre.

The outline of the report

With the help of the notes and the flip chart sheets, the secretary writes the final report. The outline may look like this:

1. The subject of the meeting.
2. The date, venue and duration of the meeting.
3. The date on which the records were sent.
4. The list of participants invited and their functions.
5. An indication of who was present and who was unable to attend.
6. The name of the chairman and the secretary.
7. The agenda.
8. The record of the substance of the meeting (minutes or a summary of conclusions).
9. The decisions.
10. The date of the next meeting

The style of the report

The style should be simple, legible and attractive. Use short sentences and everyday vocabulary. The report is intended to be read and also to stimulate those who were absent to attend the next meeting.

Causes of failure	Remedies
<p>1. The animal has several heads</p> <p>This is the tendency to discuss several subjects at once. Each person defends his/ her point of view without listening to anyone else. The meeting leads nowhere.</p>	<p>One subject at a time</p>
<p>2. Confusion between what and how</p> <p>The chairman did not establish agreement with the group on how to progress. No distinction was made between the substance of the meeting ("what") and the method ("how").</p>	<p>The group agrees on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The subject to be discussed • The working method
<p>3. Censorship</p> <p>A participant would like to express an idea but the others do not let him/her speak, or else he/she does not dare to speak for fear of being criticised.</p>	<p>A chairman is nominated</p> <p>The chairman serves the group. He/she must be neutral and avoid making judgements. His/her role is to facilitate the meeting and to monitor the relationships between participants. He/she does not intervene on substance. He/she encourages everyone to take part and ensures that everyone has a chance to speak. He/she makes sure that speaking time is shared fairly and protects everyone from personal attacks or criticism.</p>
<p>4. Abuse of power</p> <p>The roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined. Some do not respect the rules that were agreed upon. The chairman seems to be involving the council members but is, in fact, manipulating them so as to make his/her own ideas prevail.</p>	
<p>5. No summary</p> <p>The group goes around in circles, returning to the same point of discussion... So much information has been shared that people are lost... Important ideas are forgotten.</p>	<p>Ensure that records are kept</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designate a secretary • Use a flip chart • Keep notes and write a report and a working method and check that the group agrees (see TB003).



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