

This is What (Direct) Democracy Looks Like

How to Run a Meeting to Get Things Done

Bonfire Collective

2015

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This guide is about one way to run a meeting if you want to make decisions democratically and get things done. The most common problem with democratic meetings is that people talk a lot but don't arrive at binding decisions. We have found that following the meeting process laid out in this guide helps us to always move towards action while still welcoming the voices of everyone. We find other meeting formats, such as Robert's Rules of Order, too unwieldy to teach and too easy for power-hungry people to manipulate. Before we begin, we should note a couple of features about our collective that account for why this process works so well for us. First, we have a membership list and only members may vote. Second, in order to become a member, applicants need to agree with a document called our "Points of Unity", which lays our political and practical principles. We recommend that you ask applicants to skip a meeting so that their candidacy can be discussed. Sometimes we deny people membership if we don't think they will work well with the rest of the collective. This meeting process may not work for people with widely divergent worldviews. However, if there is general agreement among your group and your members are committed to democracy, our method will probably help you to make decisions and get things done.

Roles

There are at least three roles you need to have to make a meeting run smoothly: the facilitator, the note-taker, and other members. The facilitator is the person who controls the flow of the meeting in order to explore issues in a disciplined fashion and bring the group to conclusive decisions. The role of facilitator rotates at each meeting. We recommend that the facilitator be the person who took notes during the previous meeting. We proceed through the list of facilitators alphabetically by first name. The note-taker also rotates. Note-takers should write legibly so that their notes can be read by others.

Additionally, note-takers should be careful about what sorts of things go into the notes: discussions of actions of questionable legality should never be recorded, for example. Finally, other members of the group bring issues to discuss, make proposals, and vote.

Meeting Structure

1. To begin, the facilitator calls the meeting to order and prompts everyone to introduce themselves and say how they would like to be referred to (e.g. names and preferred pronouns). Optionally, the facilitator can also ask engage in a quick informal discussion by asking everyone to answer a question of the facilitator's choice.
2. The facilitator then asks for announcements and reportbacks. Announcements are bits of new information that the group may want to know, while reportbacks are check-ins about tasks that members agreed to perform between meetings. Announcement and reportbacks should be brief.
3. The facilitator then asks the group for items to be included in the meeting agenda. The agenda will determine what the group discusses for the rest of the meeting. As the group names topics, the note-taker creates an unordered list. When the list of desired topics is complete, the facilitator decides the order in which topics should be discussed. Sometimes,

it is obvious that topics should be merged or split depending on the complexity of the issue, so the facilitator should be prepared to make this decision as well. Often issues brought up during announcements and reportbacks will require action from the group and should be made into agenda items. It may also be useful to ask the note-taker to read through last meeting's minutes in order to recall current projects. While the meeting agenda is being constructed, the facilitator may want to do a time check to determine whether any members need to leave early as this may influence the order of agenda items.

4. When the agenda is complete, the facilitator announces the first agenda item and invites attendees to speak. If multiple people begin to speak at once, the facilitator should immediately take stack by declaring one person to be the speaker and the other person to be on stack. For example, "Jonas, go ahead. Mary, you're on stack, then Juan." Taking stack prevents some people from dominating the discussion. In a big meeting, you may need to ask everyone to raise their hands before speaking. Some meetings will require you to be more vigilant about taking stack than others, but when in doubt, it never hurts to take stack.

When it is time for the group to make a decision about an issue, ask for a carefully worded proposal from any group member, e.g. "OK, Lola, would you like to propose that?" Once the proposal has been made, ask "Any discussion?" to open the floor for comment and debate. If necessary, amend the proposal, then open the floor for discussion again. When discussion and debate has ended, bring the proposal to a vote. Members can vote yes (thumbs up), no (thumbs down), or stand aside (thumb sideways). Non-members can be encouraged to practice voting, but their votes do not actually count. Because our collective runs on consensus, even a single "no" vote, also known as a hard block, means the proposal does not pass. Members should only hard block on proposals that, if adopted, would make them want to leave the group. In most well-run egalitarian groups, hard blocks almost never happen. Stand-asides do not block proposals, but instead indicate a lack of genuine enthusiasm for the idea or a potential conflict of interest. If you see too many stand-asides, you should probably have another discussion about that issue before moving forward. When a proposal passes, this proposal becomes official group policy moving forward and remains in effect until another proposal contradicting it is passed. It is good practice to have a policy that votes are only binding if the group has quorum, meaning that at least 2/3 of the members are present for voting or reachable by phone. Your group may choose to use a standard other than consensus in order to pass proposals. We recommend that you set the bar at least at a 2/3 majority vote in order to keep the group from splintering into factions.

The closing of each agenda item should entail a vote or a bottom-line. Bottom lines are an individual promise to complete a task, e.g. "I bottom-line asking Nathan to table at that event." As the facilitator, help attendees to make their bottom-lines as specific as possible so that the group understands what is about to happen.

5. When the meeting agenda has concluded, go around the circle and ask each person to repeat their bottom-lines to the group. This is good practice for memory, accountability, and bookkeeping, but it also reveals whether someone has accidentally taken on more than they can reasonably handle. Bottom-lines are sometimes exchanged during this final moment of the meeting, so be sure to carefully note who ends up volunteering for what.

Remember that in the case of bottom-lines, there is no general “we will do x” – there is only “I will do x” and “I will also do x” because bottom-lines without individual assignees are unlikely to get done. If you have any doubt that a bottom-line will be completed, ask a second person to volunteer to help achieve that bottom-line too. Once the agenda has been concluded and the bottom lines reviewed, the facilitator can bring the meeting to a close. When the meeting is over, try not to unofficially continue the meeting in other spaces and media. Only highly time-sensitive issues should be discussed via other channels in between meetings. While we certainly discuss important issues outside of meetings, we try not to build consensus on specific voting issues outside of meetings. This kind of backroom dealing weakens the democratic process.

Being a Good Facilitator

We believe being a strong facilitator of democratic meetings makes you an asset to your community. As facilitator, you are temporarily the most powerful person in the room. Strong facilitation leads to excellent meetings. Some people enjoy this power, but others find it uncomfortable. Remember that you are doing a service to the group by being a strong facilitator and that next week someone else will hold that power. Even well-intentioned discussions of important issues can go off track. As the facilitator, it’s your job to draw the line and redirect the conversation. You have the power to interrupt anybody and call any discussion to order – use it.

In general, if the process is going too fast then slow it down, if it’s going too slow then speed it up. When members complain about the speed of the meeting, listen. Encourage people to use hand signals for “me too” (wiggly fingers). If someone is talking too much, say, “I think we need to move this along because we have a big agenda today” (usually true). When people come in late, do not review the early part of the meeting for them – they can look at the notes later. There is no project so valuable that it is incapable of being derailed by lack of discipline in how time is used.

In your attempt to bring the group to decisions you have a few tools in your toolbox. If the group seems generally in favor of an issue but you haven’t heard from everyone, watch for body language that indicates that someone who is silent might not agree. Ask that person their opinion, or risk being surprised by a hard block during voting. If the group seems truly lost on how to approach an issue, you can propose to table it until next meeting so that someone can do more research or seek outside advice. If you have a hunch that everyone agrees but the group seems unsure, consider taking a straw poll – a nonbinding vote on the proposal at hand – in order to figure out who the real dissenters are and then focus on their objections. If the group is generally in agreement except for one or two people, consider directly asking those people to amend the proposal to make it something they would agree to – often it’s an easy fix. Read *Come Hell or High Water* (2009) by AK Press for an extended discussion of group dynamics that affect group decision-making.

Not every issue can or should be handled during a meeting. For example, if someone is straining the collective process by talking too much, you should approach them outside of the meeting to explain that they need to make more space for others. Legally, open discussion of illegal actions during meetings can form the basis of a conspiracy charge that can be used to target the whole group, including those who chose not to participate in illegal activities. Keep this in mind as you

decide what issues to discuss in open meetings. It is the facilitator's job to guide the discussion appropriately.

The Importance of Good Process

If the group is violating its own guidelines, highlight this fact by declaring a point of process. This phrase is a big "yield" sign that communicates that we are at risk of drifting away from the principles of democratic decision-making. For example, if a member is so eager to pass a proposal that they opt to skip the discussion and go straight to a vote, declaring a point of process can remind the group to slow down and have a real discussion. Other violations of process are more subtle, such as pushing the group into certain actions through communications with outside members (e.g. "I know we voted on doing the event on Thursday, but when I talked to the venue they said it had to be Friday, so I signed us up for Friday."). Activism tends to attract powerful personalities and every now and then one of us tries to push an idea a little too hard. There are infinite ways to violate process, so keep an eye out for new trickery. If you aren't sure of a procedure, just ask the group.

One of the features of democracy is that your proposal will not always be approved by the group. Just because the group cannot reach consensus on implementing your idea does not mean you shouldn't do it by yourself. For instance, some protest actions might endanger some members of the group but would be an acceptable risk for others. You can do that stuff – you're just not doing it on behalf of the group.

As a member of a democratic group, you need to be on the lookout for dynamics that seem to perpetuate the powerlessness of certain people within your group. If particular people consistently break process – say so. If somebody is a chronic interrupter, ask them to raise their hand so that you can recognize them as being on stack. Any group, no matter how intentional in its design, is capable of devolving into old power dynamics that plague most of society. It is an unfortunate possibility that, if you are committed to democracy, your meetings may be the only place that some members feel truly respected. Cherish this hard-won democratic territory – and fight to expand it.

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