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How to organise a meeting

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Organising requires getting together and making decisions, sharing information and organisational work. It only takes a few informal chats among any group of people before it becomes obvious that some structure is greatly needed in facilitating group functioning. Without structures and procedures people often forget what was agreed, what tasks were to be done and by whom, or when the next meeting is.

People often get frustrated that they never get to have their say, or that meetings go on for ages with no decisions made, not to mention people jumping from one topic to another. Fortunately a long history of activism and anarchist organising has led to the development of methods for dealing with these problems and arranging meetings so that they can be effective.

Whatever meeting process your group agrees on will probably naturally end up being tailored to your particular group. There are no hard and fast rules, just guidelines and suggested roles. One of the most important, that immediately begins to bring order to a group's meetings is a rule that people raise their hands to indicate they wish to contribute, and then speakers are taken in order.

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This requires someone to take on the role of facilitator and bring those whose turn it is to speak into the discussion. In meetings of 8 or more people it's very useful to have the queue of speakers' names visible (on a whiteboard or similar) so that everyone knows when their turn is coming and how long they're likely to be waiting.

The facilitator's role is to help the group have a well run and inclusive meeting, encouraging similar levels of input from everyone, keeping the meeting focussed on one item at a time until a decision is reached by the group. The facilitator does not direct the group or make decisions for them, and the role should be rotated through all group members, it is a skill that almost anyone can learn.

At the beginning of a meeting, figuring out what points are to be discussed and writing up the agenda in a prominent place creates a very useful tool. It gives the group a good idea of the scope of the meeting, of how long the meeting is likely to take, and allows the items to be discussed to be ordered in a way that makes sense – usually moving the weightiest, most time consuming items to the end, and trimming some items if it looks like the meeting will run too long.

The facilitator should ensure that the outcome of each agenda item is recorded, this can be done by a separate minute taker, to relieve the facilitator of some of the effort of running the meeting. Each agenda item will probably lead to a decision by the group.

How decisions are made is something that should be explicitly agreed upon by the group, most groups use consensus-based decision making (where all decisions are agreed to, or at least not disagreed with, by all members).

The outcome of each decision should be recorded by the minute-taker, this is quite likely to involve an action (i.e. a task to be carried out by one or more members of the group) and/or an agenda item at a later meeting – if further discussion or a report-back after an action is required.

If meetings tend to run too long, adding a time limit to each agenda item can help meetings to run to schedule. Time limits do not have to be rigidly adhered to but it will help the group to be aware of how long the meeting will take, and decide whether or not to continue on a point if it's likely to make the meeting run longer.

As agenda items are discussed and dealt with, the facilitator should try to regulate the flow of conversation to ensure roughly equal participation from all members. Quieter members should be encouraged to participate in discussion, with no individual being allowed to dominate and more vocal members asked to hold back.

There are many tools available for aiding with this, the use of hand signals (see end of this article), a conch or talking-stick, if the group is large, breaking it up into smaller discussion groups, using go-arounds (i.e. taking input from everyone in turn) to get each attendee to express their thoughts on a point or issue.

As proposals are made the facilitator should summarize them for the group and make sure everyone agrees with what is proposed. It can be useful to write proposals up where they can be seen by all meeting attendees. If agreement hasn't been reached after a reasonable amount of time and discussion the item may be tabled until the next meeting.

The facilitator should try to keep the meeting moving forward but make sure each item is sufficiently discussed, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to input, and not mistaking silence for agreement.

Vibe-watching is another important aspect of facilitation. Meetings are necessary for getting things discussed and agreed upon but also for group-maintenance — ensuring everyone feels fully involved and empowered in the group and encouraging solidarity and connection between group members.

Vibe-watch includes keeping an eye on the atmosphere of the meeting, helping the groups deal with conflict and distress, and watching for members being affected. If the group is becoming restless, bored or tired, the facilitator (or vibe-watcher if the role has been assigned to someone else) can call for a break or run a quick energising activity.

After all agenda items have been covered it's common practise to have an AOB section, where people can bring up brief items that either have come up during the meeting or were not thought of in time to make it onto the agenda. Before the meeting ends the date, time and location of the group's next meeting should be decided on, along with who will take on the facilitation role(s).

There are some people who, for one reason or another, do not find they can participate well in meetings, or group settings. If this is the case in your group efforts should be made to ensure they are included in other ways.

Someone attending the meeting can make sure any points or proposals the person would like discussed are brought up at the meeting. They can be given the opportunity to have a say in decisions made at the meeting and can be briefed afterwards, along with having the minutes sent to them.

Meeting facilitation can be difficult and demanding, particularly with large groups (anything upwards of 10 or 12 people). The role of facilitator should be rotated through the group with everyone who feels they can taking turns facilitating. External facilitation training is often a good idea, groups like WSM, Seeds For Change and others are open to providing such training.

Anarchist meeting facilitation can be used effectively with groups of any size, even up to hundreds of attendees. It should be kept in mind that the larger the group the more time will probably be required for each agenda item, and the longer it will take for the group to reach consensus on decisions.

Similarly, if a proposal is made and neither the facilitator nor the queue keeper have noted it, indicate that you have a technical point and point it out.

Try to self-facilitate as much as possible: if you have been speaking often or for a long time try to let others in ahead of you, if you are called upon to speak but you don't think it's your turn point it out.

Where you feel it is necessary, you can actively participate in facilitation by making a technical point, e.g. when you don't think enough time has been given for discussion of a proposal.

Use the hand signals:

hand up = add me to the queue please

wavy hands pointing upwards = approval

wavy hands pointing downwards = disapproval

wavy hands pointing out from the body = ambivalence or not sure

T-sign = technical point – not related to the discussion but to something ancillary

two hands up (or a finger on each hand) = I wish to jump the queue to give a brief response to something just said

Further Reading

WSM, How to avoid Bad Meetings and hold a Conversation about Anarchism, www.wsm.ie

Seeds For Change, Facilitating Meetings, www.seedsforchange.org.uk

Facilitating a large group is more difficult and the responsibilities can be shared among several members. Some possible roles and the usual duties associated with each are provided below.

Your group may choose to adopt some or all of them, combine some of them, or think of new ones of your own that suit your group. However your group decides to organise your meetings it is most important that each member feels meetings are an effective and useful endeavour.

Roles: Facilitator, Queue Keeper, Time Keeper, Minute Taker, Vibe-Watcher, Attendee

Equipment: Meeting room with seating, heating (if needed), whiteboard(s), markers & wipers, pens + paper and/or laptop

Facilitator

Prepare the agenda before the meeting

Make sure the meeting location is appropriate for all attendees: accessibility, temperature, etc

Send around any pre-meeting material you have

Explain at the beginning what the meeting is about and how it will run

Do a go-around to have everyone introduce themselves to the group (usually called a check-in)

Have the minutes of the last meeting with you (or get someone else to have them)

Look for agenda items from attendees at the beginning of the meeting

Organise agenda items into an appropriate order

Add a time limit/guideline for each agenda point

Keep the meeting running smoothly and on-agenda and try to keep agenda items to their stated time limits

If non-agenda items come up in discussion they may be added to the agenda, or moved to AOB

Make sure one person at a time speaks (back-and-forths can be ok sometimes but they should be the exception rather than the rule)

Point at and call the name of the person whose turn it is to speak

Discourage people talking out of turn

Encourage people to speak who haven't spoken or have been speaking less than others (or ask more vocal attendees to hold back)

Get the queue keeper to write down all proposals on a whiteboard

Engage the meeting on said proposals and try to get to consensus

Make sure people feel ready to make a decision on a proposal, they made need some more time

Use go-arounds where appropriate to get discussion flowing

Keep the numbers of direct responses down, 3 per person per discussion is a good rough limit

Ensure the minute taker has noted all decisions and actions and anything else that needs to be noted

At the end of the meeting check to see if the group would like any of the agenda items or decisions revisited at the next meeting

Have a closing go-around (a check-out) to check how the group feels the meeting went, if aims were reached, actions apportioned fairly, and everything discussed thoroughly

Time Keeper

Keep track of the time spent on each agenda item and alert the group, or facilitator, when the time limit allotted to an item is approaching

Negotiate extra time for agenda items or the whole meeting, if necessary

Queue Keeper

Write down the names of people who put their hands up to speak.

Cross/rub out the names of those who have spoken.

If you wish to speak yourself add your name to bottom of the queue.

If someone has a direct response or a technical point and the facilitator hasn't noticed, alert them

Write down any proposals that are announced (can also be performed by the agenda keeper)

Agenda Keeper

Write the agenda items up as they are announced.

Cross/rub out agenda items once discussion has finished.

Write down any proposals that are announced (can also be performed by the queue keeper).

Minute Taker

Write down the start and end time of the meeting.

Take down the names of attendees.

Record action items, proposals, decisions, agenda items for the next meeting, and any other important points such as volunteers or interesting bits of conversation

Minuting everything that's said is very difficult and is probably unnecessary, if this is required, consider recording the meeting, otherwise just write down the topics discussed

After the meeting distribute the minutes to group members

Vibe Watcher

Pay attention to the group dynamics and emotional atmosphere, listening carefully and observing body language.

Intervene, if it seems necessary, in situations of distress or conflict, perhaps suggesting one-on-one time-outs or smaller discussions

Suggest breaks or energising activities where they seem appropriate or required, meetings should be fun and enjoyable where possible

Attendee

Send around any pre-meeting material you have.

Put your hand up when you wish to speak, you will be called upon by the facilitator.

If someone has their hand up but the queue keeper or facilitator hasn't noticed, point at the person.