



MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Creating Effective Agendas

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Introduction

An agenda is the framework that helps meetings run effectively and efficiently. It is a step-by-step outline of the topics to be covered at the meeting.

Effective agendas enhance group accomplishments.

- The agenda informs members of accomplishments and priorities.
- It ensures adequate consideration of all issues, events and projects
- It keeps the discussion focused and on track.
- It makes effective use of participants' time.

To be most effective, the chair and key participants should create the agenda prior to the meeting.

The chair plays the lead role in planning the agenda and is responsible for arranging the facilities and chairing the meeting.

- The chair and the secretary communicate the information to those who should attend the meeting.
- Committee chairs research and organize their reports and ensure someone is at the meeting to discuss the subject.
- Members should contact the chair with topics they would like discussed.

Gather Items For Agendas

- Items for the agenda will come from a variety of sources: a review of the minutes from the last meeting, new correspondence, the organization's calendar and input gathered from committee chairs and staff.
- By involving the members in this planning, you will gain more commitment for the activities of the organization.
- An "agenda planning committee" could be set up to involve more people and distribute the workload while providing training for future leaders.
- Keep in mind that the agenda items should relate to the mandate of the organization.

Consider The Needs Of Members

The social interaction and networking that take place at meetings can make for a more effective and harmonious organization. This is often overlooked when there are many tasks to accomplish.

- Identify why members are involved and consider this when creating the agenda. Some members are involved because they want to make a contribution and be involved in the planning of activities. Some members are there for the companionship or social interaction. Others may be looking for mental stimulation that could be fulfilled by speakers and educational programs or they may want to develop their skills by taking on leadership roles.
- Be sure to plan some time to set the climate of the meeting. Informal socializing and interaction among the participants establish a positive, constructive atmosphere.
- Consider the length of your meeting. Two to three hours is the maximum time. This provides adequate time to accomplish the meeting's goals and ensures that members leave feeling energized and productive.
- Refreshments and snacks can be included and will act as energizers when the meeting is lagging.

Agenda Items and Responsibility

When all the items are assembled, the next step is to consider what action needs to be taken for each topic. Defining the action helps members focus and move the discussion forward more quickly.

- Use action words such as decide, discuss, review, select and complete. Rather than listing "fundraising report" on the agenda, consider the required decisions:
 - Review the recommendations of the fundraising committee.
 - Decide on the fundraising event for next year.
 - Select the speaker for the next event.
- Identify the resources needed for each topic. Committee chairs or persons involved with the topic should be asked to introduce the item, provide back-ground and recommendations.

Time Allocation

Assess each agenda item and assign a realistic amount of time for discussion. This is not easy, as everything may not fit into the meeting time frame. You may have to establish the priority of items, delay some topics or consider other ways to handle them.

Some tips related to the timing are:

- Start and finish on time. Expect that your attendees will arrive on time. If the group is not accustomed to this, give a warning beforehand.
- A group's attention span parallels a bell-shaped curve. The early part of the meeting is the most lively and creative. Discuss topics that need bright ideas and clear, alert heads when the energy level is the highest. Easier items and non-confrontational items should be placed towards the end of the meeting.
- In a tight agenda, there is a temptation to omit the social interaction activities. Try not to do this, as these activities are vital to the well-being of the group.

Approaches For Agendas

The order of the topics on your agenda depends on the approach taken.

Common Order

The following agenda outline is commonly used:

- Call to order
- Approval of agenda
- Reading and approval of minutes
- Officer reports - treasurer, president
- Business arising from the minutes
- Committee reports
- New business
- Adjournment

With this format, the most important decisions tend to be left to the time of the meeting when the participants' energy is flagging.

Information Sharing and Processing

This approach is similar to the common order, but each item that is discussed is labeled as "information sharing" or "information processing."

- Information Sharing (IS) is for information-only items. No discussion is needed, as it is a straight-forward sharing of information. Clarification questions can be asked.
- Information Processing (IP) designates topics that require debate, analysis, discussion, action planning and decision making.
- This method helps the members focus their discussion on those decisions that need to be made and move quickly through the items that are for information only.

Priority Agendas

In this format, all items are categorized and put on the agenda by priority. There are four categories:

- urgent and important
- urgent and less important
- important and less urgent
- less important and less urgent

The agenda is planned with the most urgent and important topics scheduled early in the meeting when everyone is fresh and energized. This method allows for the time and energy necessary to make effective decisions.

Consent Agenda

In this format, the matters that do not need to be discussed or are in the less important and less urgent categories are moved to a consent agenda. This includes information items, procedural items, approval of minutes, previously approved decisions, routine matters, correspondence requiring no action, and information reports.

A consent agenda is not to be used to drive decisions through without proper discussion and debate. It contains items that are for information purposes only. It helps streamline meetings, as it allows more time to focus on the topics of higher priority. When individuals provide written reports for the meetings, they feel compelled to speak to that report. This is not done with a consent agenda.

For a consent agenda to work well:

- All participants must receive a list of consent items, related reports and supporting materials in advance of the meeting to allow time to review.
- At the beginning of the meeting, the chair asks if any items should be removed from the consent agenda. The only time an item should be removed is when significant further discussion is needed.
- When a member requests an item be removed for discussion, it must be removed and the chair then decides where to place it on the meeting agenda.
- It is permissible to ask questions of clarification on consent agenda topics.
- The remaining consent agenda items are read out by the secretary and the chair states "if there is no objection, these items will be adopted." After a pause for late objections, the chair then says, "As there are no objections, these items can be adopted." A show of hands is not necessary.
- In the minutes, the secretary includes the reports and additional information that were adopted as part of the consent agenda.

This method can help move through the routine items quickly so that time can be spent on priority topics.

Distribution Of Agendas

Distribute a tentative agenda prior to the meeting.

This ensures:

- important business is not overlooked,
- people are reminded of the meeting,
- members can identify important items, focus on the issues, and be prepared to discuss them. This will help members feel they making a contribution.

Bring extra copies of the agenda or post it on a flip-chart or blackboard so that everyone is aware of it. This will help you accomplish all the items on the agenda.

At The Meeting

Review the agenda at the start of the meeting and make required additions, deletions or revisions. Agendas can be rearranged to accommodate new topics and schedules to ensure that the appropriate people are present for the discussion.

Annual Planning Calendar

An **Annual Planning Calendar** is a breakdown, by month, of the important dates of the organization. It includes items such as dates of meeting, fundraising activities, events and deadlines for funding applications. This planning calendar increases the knowledge of all members about their organization, as it makes everyone aware of key dates. It can be an excellent recruitment tool as it outlines the organization's activities for potential members. It is also a useful part of an orientation package for new members. The annual planning calendar should be reviewed and revised regularly throughout the year.

Action Sheet

An **Action Sheet** keeps track of actions committed to at the meeting.

- This sheet is comprised of three columns: Action Required, Person(s) Responsible and Date for Completing and/or Reporting.
- A person other than the secretary is responsible for the recording of the action sheet.
- Before the meeting is adjourned, the chair reviews the action sheet and ensures the people responsible will accept their commitments.
- The action sheet becomes an agenda item for the following meeting.

Strategies To Ensure Meetings End On Time

- Be realistic about the number of topics and decisions that can be covered in the allotted time.
- Keep the group on topic.
- Adhere to the meeting time allotments for each discussion item.
- A stopwatch or timer with an audible ring helps ensure the audience is aware of the time allocations.
- Appoint a timekeeper or meeting manager to watch the time and keep the meeting process moving.

Be Prepared For Topic Drift

As the meeting progresses, there are times when the discussion goes off on tangents related to the topic, but unrelated to the required decision. This is topic drift. This discussion is irrelevant to the meeting and wastes precious time.

- The chair needs to bring the focus back to the topic under discussion while ensuring that participants' feel their thoughts are being considered. This can be accomplished by asking:
 - Is this related to the topic under discussion?
 - Should this item be added to the agenda?
- The chair can decide to address the topic at the end of the meeting or put it on the agenda for the next meeting.
- All members need to be aware that they have a role in keeping the meeting discussion on track and on time.
- Recording these issues on a "Parking Lot" flipchart helps to maintain a visible record. Participants' ideas and concerns are not lost, and the discussion remains focused on the decision to be made. Parking Lot items are considered at the appropriate time or put on the agenda for the next meeting.

Creating Agendas At The Meeting

Sometimes circumstances prevent agendas from being developed and distributed in advance of the meeting. In this case, building the agenda at the start of the meeting is an effective strategy.

- Poll the participants for topics to be covered.
- Build the agenda by prioritizing the topics.
- Assign time allotments.
- Write the topics on a flipchart or blackboard so that they are visible to all participants.

By following the strategies discussed in this Fact-sheet, your organization will experience more effective and efficient meetings.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the following resources that were used in the development of this Factsheet and encourage people to refer to related links below for more information.

"Building Great Agendas" 3M Meeting Network - see the 3M Meeting Network Home Page

"*Planning Meeting Agendas, Dave Sharpe, Montana State University*" 2002.- see Montana State University Publications Home Page

"*Annual Agendas*" from workshop - "*How to Make Meetings, More Effective, More Efficient and More Fun*" by Nathan Garber, Nathan Garber and Associates, November 2004 - see Garber and Associates Home Page

"*Conducting Effective Meetings.*" Saskatchewan Industry and Resources, Business Cooperative Services, 2004.

"*Allotting Time for Topics, ""Creating an Actionable Agenda, ""Ending on Time.*" Academic Leadership Support, University of Wisconsin - see Academic Leadership Home Page

"*Consent Agenda.*" Clarity by AXI, Association Xpertise Inc. 2002.

Quality Improvement Training, Xerox Canada Ltd. 2000.

Related Links

- [3M Meeting Network Home Page](#)
- [Montana State University Publications Home Page](#)
- [Garber and Associates Home Page](#)
- [Saskatchewan Industry and Resources, Business Cooperative Services, 2004 - Conducting Effective Meetings](#)
- [Clarity by AXI, Association Xpertise Inc. 2002 - Consent Agenda](#)
- [Academic Leadership Support, University of Wisconsin](#)

For more information:

Toll Free: 1-877-424-1300

E-mail: ag.info.omafra@ontario.ca