

How to hold a meeting
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Good meeting procedure is probably the most basic tool in the organizers' kit. It's the most basic building block in any form of collective action. With it a group of people can accomplish a lot more than they could alone, more than the sum of their parts, if you will. Without it they can do very little, except burn themselves out and reinforce the common beliefs that you can't fight the powers that be and that collective action is a bore consisting mostly of endless meetings. Maybe that's why they don't teach it in school any more. The purpose of meeting is decision making. Decision making has several parts. The forms used must take care of each part.

decision making dissected

First, there's the bright idea. This comes out of discussion or out of somebody's head when they're thinking, driving, trying to go to sleep. We need to encourage the formation of bright ideas because we need them. Have a place for unstructured discussion and brainstorming. Bright ideas are very vulnerable when first born, so don't be tough on them. The time to challenge, criticize, amend, argue against, point out unfeasibility, all these things come later. If you jump all over the little baby ideas when they're newly hatched your chickens will stop laying them.

Next comes discussion, maturation, clarification. You've got a cool idea, but will it work? How would we make it work? This is discussion amongst friends, outside of the biz mtg, before the idea is proposed. Get it thought out well and be able to state it clearly before taking it into the meeting to be proposed. Next, our little idea, somewhat refined, is proposed in the meeting, discussed, amended and perhaps passed by the group. We're halfway there.

Implementation is next. Who's going to do it? How? With what money, equipment, support? By when? Maybe this is a committee matter. The committee is instructed by the group to do such and such, by this time, with these provisos, and to report back on such date. Or somebody volunteers to do it. Or a special committee is called for, if it doesn't fit into a standing committee.

Accountability is next. The committee or individual has agreed to do it, by this date. The larger group needs to hear that the job has been completed, or, if not, why not and when it will be done or what needs to happen to get it done. This is the easiest part to let slip. If you slack on this we're all flakes in the eyes of the world, and in actual fact, and we can't do diddly. We're screwed.

The last part will, in some cases, be review and drawing conclusions or lessons. The project didn't really accomplish what we wanted it to, and we think that's because of this and this. We'll do this differently next time. Or, this thing worked really well, because of this, so let's remember to try to repeat these good procedures. This is how we learn and advance. It's good to have a record of the action and the review and conclusions written down so we don't forget, and for the sake of those brave comrades that come after us, so that they can learn from our successes and mistakes. It's good to share this stuff with the rest of the union in other locals, so we can learn and advance together.

OK, that's what the meeting is for. Here's how to do it. Yahoo! Now we're having some fun!

what makes a good meeting

There are a couple of general characteristics that all good meetings share. One is that they are short. After about two hours people become stupefied and quit retaining information. A diminishing rate of return is reached that is easy to spot if you watch for it. People get a glassy look in their eyes. Time to adjourn. If the meetings frequently reach that point you start losing membership, or at least the active participation of members. Restructure your meetings, tighten up procedures, strengthen the chair, schedule more frequent meetings, use more committees, whatever you need to do, but don't carry on with long meetings. You'll lose

your best people, leaving the decision making and implementation to the dullwitted few who can stand to be bored and have their time wasted. See the cp or swp for examples of what that will get you in the long run.

Good meetings are fairly civil. They are interesting. They have relatively lively participation from most people present. They get a lot of work done. They are efficient and move along quickly. They are well organized. They don't wander off into subjects that don't concern the organization at that time.

The basic tools or parts of a good meeting include an agenda, a chair, often a co-chair, a recording secretary, and most importantly a rank&file that knows how to take part in a good meeting. That's the real key. If the r&f is passive and sheep like then you're just out of luck. You'll never do diddysquat and you may as well go home. If the people in the meeting don't really care about the business at hand, there's nothing you can do short of thinking up some business they do care about, or finding out what they care about and doing that instead. This falls under the heading of agenda. More on that soon. If they just don't know how to do it, but are willing, you're ok. A strong chair can take the helm for a while, and institute a part of the meeting that teaches the meeters how to meet. This is important and needs to take a high priority.

teaching the meeters to meet

There are two parts to teaching people how to hold a meeting. One is to set aside a part of each meeting, at the end, to briefly discuss the meeting itself. People can speak up about how they felt and what they wanted to have happen, what didn't happen, how it was too long and boring, and criticize the chair and each other. This is touchy, but some form of criticism is necessary to collective action, unless you are willing to have a boss who does it all for you. Keep it impersonal, be gentle, understand each other as best you can, and it can be a really good thing for the group. Try to work out how the meeting or some part of the meeting could have been done better.

The second part of teaching the meeters how to meet is to rotate the chair. You do this for the obvious reason - that you need to have more than one good chair in the group, and also for the purpose of teaching the membership how to be in a meeting, how it really works, how to be chaired. What you want is a whole room full of good chairs, all just chairing the crap out of themselves and each other and all keeping an eye on the process and the big picture as well as taking part as members. Then you've really got something. Then you really make the chips fly. It's a bit like the way waiters love to wait on other waiters, because they know what's going on, are sympathetic and appreciative and help the process along. Ditto with the chair. It's a real joy to chair people who know how to chair.

If you've got an experienced chair, get him/her to chair a few meetings to show how it's done. Then start putting one brave soul at a time in the hot seat with the experienced chair as co-chair to step in as needed and guide the trainee. Keep the same trainee in the chair for several consecutive meetings, until h/she is actually

Getting the hang of it. Take the time at the end of the meeting to critique, ever so gently and positively, the chairship and to suggest better ways to handle situations. Keep it rotating slowly in this manner and eventually you'll have a group that's a breeze to chair, and who can go out and do the same thing elsewhere. We're all leaders, right? If nobody in the group really knows how to do it, then you all have to learn together. Do this as a group project and give it the priority it deserves. Train yourselves one or two at a time, not with a too-fast rotation where nobody ever gets a chance to really get it down. It takes time.

pick your process

The group has got to agree on a decision making process. The obvious choices are consensus and majority rule. Majority rule has a bad rep amongst some people, but it gets the job done. If it's done right you'll almost always have consensus anyhow, but you've got a really functional system to go forward with when consensus can't be reached. Consensus usually means long meetings with a lot of long talk that goes way off the subject at hand. In my experience you can get a lot fairer, more democratic and egalitarian process, in actual practice,

with majority rule, and get a lot more work done. Consensus is more applicable to a house meeting, to a small group that lives together and is really tight. With a more diverse group like an iww local, that actually has a lot of work to get done, majority rule is the best bet. Consensus is also much easier to sabotage. I've seen it done more than once.

a sample meeting

You have to set a time and place and frequency for you meetings. Call the first one, and put this on the first agenda. No time is good for everybody. Do the best you can, and remember it can always be changed. Get a place that's quiet, private, and preferably doesn't belong to one of the members. That's a possible power problem, so avoid it if you can.

Agenda the first part of an agenda is the order of business. Take the one from the IWW constitution for starters, and modify it if need be. It's a good one, tried and true. The chair prepares a proposed agenda, leaving space for additions. The agenda has to be approved by vote of the group, or else you're already being led by the nose. Sort of like the situation you meet in the voting booth.

let's go through the agenda one item at a time.

The chair should be chosen at the previous meeting, so as to be able to prepare in advance. The chair gets there early, sets up chairs for the membership, makes coffee or whatever, prepares a proposed agenda big enough to be easily read by all, greets people as they arrive.

When it's time to start the chair calls the meeting to order. I recommend doing this at the exact moment the meeting was scheduled for and let the latecomers be late. One of the most important things in a good meeting is to avoid wasting people's precious time. Let the late ones be late and miss out (they can read the minutes), and reward the prompt ones by not wasting their time.

Choose a recording secretary. This person takes the minutes. The minutes should be clear, legible and brief. They must include motions made and whether they carried or not, how they are to be implemented, by when and by whom.

That's the meat of it. Also include time and place of meeting, who chaired and recorded, who was present. You can leave out the discussion on questions usually. Get the bones and keep it clear and brief.

Reading the minutes from the previous meeting. They should be read in full and approved, or amended and then approved by vote of the group. This way everybody has it clear what has been decided, and who said they would do what by when. That's your jumping-off point for the current meeting. It keeps you honest. It makes a record of the life of the collectivity. It's necessary for making the next agenda. Don't shortchange the minutes.

Approve the agenda or amend and approve. Make sure people know they have a say in this. It's more important than the average newcomer realizes.

Brief announcements and communications. The key word here is brief. These items require no discussion. If they generate agenda items for new business, get them on the agenda right away and move on. You can easily get mired down here, so watch it. They should be relevant to the group, and if they are lengthy either have them in written form for interested parties to read later or have people who want details talk to the person later. Keep it rolling.

Reports: also require no discussion, except for possible clarification. If they generate business to be discussed or acted upon, they go to new business or to the appropriate committee. Reports should be kept brief, and can be presented in written form if they're long. "I've got a report here from the doodad committee, regarding current innovations and the rising cost of gizmos. It's long, so I'll let you read it after the meeting if

you're interested." reports include those of officers, standing or special committees, delegates, attendees of events or activities. Also report on the implementation of previously made decisions of the group. "we decided last meeting to poison the stream and murder the neighbors' dog. Bill and nancy were in charge implementation on that one. Can we hear a report?" that sort of thing.

Now we're getting into the main meat of the meeting, the business. We should have whizzed through everything up to here pretty quick (but not so quick as to neglect), because now is when the going, of necessity, gets a little slower. Business is anything that requires a decision and/or implementation by the group.

Old business. Old business was once new business, and we're not done with it quite yet. Maybe it got tabled till we got more information. Maybe we were too dingy to deal with it last meeting, but didn't want to just forget it. Maybe it was too hairy to handle all at once. Whatever business wasn't satisfactorily completed last meeting is now old business, unless all we need is a report on implementation.

New business item is best presented as a motion though sometimes you may need a few whereases to make it clear why you are presenting the motion. The make of the motion should have taken the time to think it out pretty well, maybe kicked it around with friends, and should have a pretty clear idea of what needs to happen, thus saving us all a lot of time. "i move that we take off our pants and sing yankee doodle on 14th street, this wednesday at noon, and that a committee be set up to help implement this decision." there, now! That's a nice clear way to bring up a new business item. The chair says:'it has been moved that we blah, blah.." restating the motion, both for the sake of the membership and to help the recording secretary get it right in the minutes. The chair says: "is there a second?" if nobody seconds it then that's that. It's not much of an idea and we can get on with the business. If one more person wants it to pass, they second it, and it's not totally out of left field, and apparently worthy of our time. "is there any discussion?" If it's a shoo-in there doesn't need to be much discussion. We don't really need to hear three people say why they think it's a good idea if nobody disagrees. The chair should direct the discussion with this in mind. Ask if anybody wants to speak against the motion. Ask if anybody is unclear on it or has hesitations or reservations about it. Draw them out, to be sure it's adequately discussed, but ride herd on it to avoid waste of time. Keep the discussion to the topic. The chair has to tactfully interrupt if somebody is wandering off the track. Membership should also do this as needed. It's a bit tricky, but very learnable.

When it seems the question is clarified, adequately discussed, the chair or any member can call the question, call for a vote. "all opposed. All in favor." if you think it's a shoo-in, which is really common in a well functioning group, you can save a lot of time by asking, after the motion has been seconded, if anyone's opposed. If not, it passes without the need for discussion.

When a motion passes, make sure to get it implemented. If it's a one or two person job, call for volunteers. If it's a committee job refer it to the appropriate committee or set one up. Make sure we know who's going to do it, by when, and when we'll hear a report on it. Make sure the recorder gets all that in the minutes. Move on to the next item of business. Often you'll need a break to get through a two hour meeting with a clearheaded group. We usually take five or ten minutes between old and new business. It's best if people will move around, go outside, make noise.

If there's too much business and you see that you're losing the membership, see if there are items that can be tabled. You have to ask the person whose item it is or the group about tabling something. The chair can't just do it without permission, but the chair can suggest it.

The last item is good and welfare. This is a more general discussion of things pertaining to the good and welfare of the group and it's members. It's less structured, more touchy-feely, if you will. It includes critique of the meeting and chair, somebody needs a place to live or a part for their car, somebody needs help or has extra zucchinis, somebody has a general feeling about how the group is doing, the direction it's moving. Stuff that matters, but doesn't really fit into the motion-making-and-implementation mode. It's the community part and deserves time and attention.

Pick your next chair, agree on the next meeting time and place and somebody can move to adjourn. No matter how good your meetings get you'll rarely hear anyone speak against a motion to adjourn.

robert's rules reduced

A few basic rules need to be in place to carry out the making and passing of a motion. Robert's rules of order are so complex that they're of little actual use, but the basic ideas are sound.

A motion can be made by any member at any time, having been recognized by the chair. Any time there isn't already a motion on the floor that is. If there's a motion on the floor, that motion must be dealt with before another motion can be made. Exceptions are a motion to table or the suggestion of an amendment. Once a motion is on the floor anything that doesn't pertain directly to that motion is out of order, and should be cut off promptly before the whole shooting match is sidetracked and fuddled. You can come back to it later.

If an amendment is suggested it must be accepted by the maker of the motion before it can be acted upon. Otherwise the original motion has to be voted on before another motion, even an amended version of the previous, can be made. Otherwise you get the situation where some people are speaking to the original motion, some to the amendment, and maybe some to a second or third possible amendment. The result is modification of the sense of the meeting.

A 'point of order' is always in order. In other words it can be made at any time. You just say "point of order" and then make your point. It should be either for clarification of the motion at hand or clarification of the process. Use it to point out that the speaker is not addressing the business at hand, that the chair has overlooked some part of the process, that people can't hear what's going on, something directly related to the process, not the content, of the meeting. "call the question" is a common point of order. This means that the discussion is going on too long, the ground has been covered, people are repeating themselves, and let's vote on it now.

miscellaneous words of wisdom

The meeting isn't really the time for social stuff, hanging out with your friends. It's about business. The friend stuff is at least as important, so give it its due. You may want to have social hour before the meeting or repair to a nearby pub afterwards to hang out and talk.

Committees are a good way to get work done and save meeting time. If something can be done in committee, don't use up the time of the whole body on it. The committees have to report back to the larger group, but you don't need twenty people to decide where to get a good price on paper clips and who should pick them up.

Something an old wobbly taught us (along with most of the rest of this) is to always conduct your meeting as if there were a hundred people there, to be ready when the time comes when there are a hundred people there. Sound advice. For instance, it's a good idea to get people to stand up to speak. Helps us all hear, and it gives us all a little experience speaking to a group. Makes it a lot easier when you have to stand up in front of a large group to speak at a rally or something.

Good meeting procedure is something we can all learn. It's not that hard, and not that boring or unpleasant. In fact, when compared to bad meeting procedure it's downright fun and exciting. A lot of groups start to fall apart or cease to be democratic when they get past a dozen people, because they don't make the jump from the little group of friends that functions in a loose family style to the larger-group ways of working. Many of us have little or no experience with a functional and healthy large democratic group, but such things do exist. The relearning and development of the forms and ways of doing this large-group democratic collective work is in and of itself a pretty subversive action in the present social context.

Like it says in one old wobbly cartoon: Organize now! Organize right!

HERE'S THE AGENDA FORM WE USE:

- * Call to order
- * Choose recording secretary
- * Read and approve minutes
- * Agenda review and approval
- * Brief announcements & communications
- * Reports
- * Old biz
- * New biz
- * Good and Welfare
- * Next chair & Meeting critique