Meeting agendas have many benefits, yet surprisingly few leaders take the time to plan and circulate an agenda ahead of time. This publication will help group leaders construct, disseminate and use an effective meeting agenda.

Planning Meeting Agendas

by Dave Sharpe, MSU Extension Community Development Specialist

Do your meetings have a specific agenda? If they have one, is it merely a listing of topics? Are the members aware of the agenda? Do the first items on the agenda get lengthy discussion and the last little, if any? Are items frequently dropped from the discussion, forgotten or tabled until the next meeting because the members have worn out or the time has run out? Planning an agenda requires careful thought before the meeting. It takes time and effort. But a carefully planned agenda can help prevent these common meeting problems and can serve a number of other important functions as well. The functions are those that improve meeting efficiency and group communication.

Meeting efficiency functions
• The agenda lets both members and leaders know what has been accomplished and what remains to be accomplished.
• It permits adequate consideration of all agenda items.
• It keeps discussion on track, preventing introduction of extraneous items.

Communication functions
• The agenda helps maintain the organization by planning to meet the needs of all members.
• If circulated between meetings, the agenda helps maintain communication among members.
• It helps everyone understand what concerns are to be addressed and what action is to be taken on each.
• It helps members and others decide if they’re interested in attending.
• If circulated before the meeting, the agenda allows members time to prepare to participate more effectively at the meeting.
• It allows a carefully planned climate to occur.

With all of an agenda’s benefits, it is surprising that few leaders take the time to plan and circulate agendas. For many meetings, the agenda exists only in the chairperson’s head.

Follow these five steps for planning meeting agendas:

Step 1—Gather items to be covered
Items to be covered come from a variety of sources. As a group leader, you are aware of old business items from previous meetings that need to be covered. Most groups have committee reports that must be included in the agenda. You may already be thinking of new business items that should be considered. Additional ideas for new business may come from other group members, state or national levels of your organization and from other interests in the community.

Involving members in this item-gathering step is very important. People are more likely to be committed to activities they help plan, including group meetings. Members can be involved through agenda planning committees. Members can also be involved through mailed or telephone surveys asking what items they would like to see included at the meeting.

Step 2—Consider member needs
In addition to the business items that help the group accomplish its tasks, you should include activities that help maintain the group. Different people are interested in different things. Try to anticipate which topics and activities will interest individual members. Then, plan activities that will interest as many as possible at each meeting.

If you cannot pack everyone’s interests into one meeting, make sure everyone’s interests get addressed at future meetings.

Arnold Bateman lists the following member needs and suggested group activities to meet these needs.
**PLANNING SHEET 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic or activity</th>
<th>Which members will be interested?</th>
<th>What action needs to be taken (committee established, report decision?)</th>
<th>Who will handle the meeting?</th>
<th>Meeting time required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Plan your meeting: Step 1—Define goals**

To set the climate of the meeting, the meeting leader identifies the climate that is needed to achieve desired outcomes. This climate is influenced by the group’s relations, its physical surroundings, and its experiences. To create a warm, unthreatening climate, planning a refreshment and informal discussion period at the beginning of the meeting can set a pleasant climate. It also allows you to start the business portion of the meeting on time with everyone present by providing a “time cushion” for latecomers.

**Step 3—Decide action and responsibility**

Once you have gathered all the items that might be covered and have considered member needs, you can list each item or activity, decide what action needs to be taken on it and who will be responsible for it. Indicating what action will be taken on an item helps members prepare for the action. If, by receiving the agenda in advance, a member is alerted that an important decision will be reached, he will have time to prepare his position before the meeting. You can also estimate the amount of time each will require. The planning sheet No. 1 is a guide to help you think through the process.

**Step 4—Assign time slots**

Having filled out Planning Sheet No. 1, you may find you won’t have time to do everything. Physicians have determined that adult productivity falls off sharply after sitting for two and a half hours. You should accomplish all your activities and deal with all agenda items within this time frame, better yet, in two hours (especially if the chairs are hard!). Your agenda will have to be carefully planned and followed if you are to accomplish all your meeting goals within this time frame.

If everything won’t fit, you will have to establish priorities and delay other items until a later meeting, assign them to committees or drop them altogether. A word of caution: The temptation may be to drop the climate-setting and socializing activities. Try to resist. Such activities are vital to the maintenance of most groups.

Tropman suggests using a bell-shaped agenda in which items are arranged in order of difficulty. He recommends starting with simple items to warm the group for the most difficult items, dealing with the difficult items next, and then tapering off with easier subjects toward the end of the meeting. This plan warms the group to the tasks at hand so it can accomplish the tasks, then cools the group before adjourning (see Planning Sheet 2).
Step 5—Print and mail
The agenda should be mailed to members at least two weeks before the meeting. This helps maintain communication between leaders and members. It also permits members to prepare so they all participate more effectively in the meetings. It allows them time to research items, discuss matters with others ahead of time and develop positions on agenda items.

Step 6—At the meeting
Even if the agenda has been distributed in advance, it is a good idea to bring enough agenda sheets for each member at the meeting. Review the planned agenda at the beginning of the meeting. Agree on additions or alterations and time allotments per item.

Finally, follow the agenda, sticking closely to planned times in the meeting. Be sure all items on the agenda ARE discussed; items not on the agenda are NOT discussed. Start on time, end on time.

References


SAMPLE AGENDA SHEET
Type of meeting:
Time:
Place:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time allotted</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Action Required</th>
<th>Who is responsible?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7:00</td>
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