

BETTER WAYS TO MANAGE MEETINGS



Adi, Bryan and Richard Walker

This edition published by
www.networklearning.org



October 2005

CONTENTS

1. PURPOSES OF MEETINGS	3
1.1 Introduction	
1.2 Meeting Purposes	
1.3 Important Preliminaries	
2. THE MEETING PLACE	4
2.1 Choice of Location	
2.2 Room Layout	
2.3 Domestic Arrangements	
3. THE AGENDA	6
3.1 Notification for Participants	
3.2 Document Identification	
3.3 Agenda Structure	
4. CHAIRING A MEETING	9
4.1 The Role of the Chairperson	
4.2 Observing Protocols and Voting	
4.3 Managing the Meeting	
4.4 Concluding the Meeting	
5. MEETING RECORDS	14
5.1 Types of Minutes	
5.2 Distribution of Minutes	
6. CHECK-LIST OF ACTIONS REQUIRED	15
6.1 Decisions and Actions to be taken	
6.2 Actions to Avoid	
7. A FINAL WORD TO PARTICIPANTS	17
8. HELPFUL INFORMATION SOURCES	18

This booklet was originally published by RedR-IHE in Sri Lanka (www.redr.org), whose Learning Support Unit provides capacity building and workshops for Government and UN agencies, and international, national and local NGOs. Copies of the original RedR-IHE booklet and others in the series may be obtained from either of the following organisations:

The Learning Support Unit of RedR-IHE Sri Lanka
5th Floor, 22 Palmyrah Avenue, Colombo 3, Sri Lanka. Tel: 00 94 (0)11 250 4877. E-mail: srilanka@redr.org

The Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies
86 Rosmead Place, Colombo 7, Sri Lanka. Tel: 00 94 (0)11 461 0943/4. E-mail: infoanalyst@cha.lk

We hope this booklet will help improve the quality of meetings that form a frequent and regular part of humanitarian activities. Please feel free to copy all or part of this booklet for training purposes.

If you have any comments or feedback, please contact the authors (walkerun@gmail.com). In particular, we would like to know your views on:

- the length of the document
- the difficulty of the language used
- if more/less illustrations would be helpful
- other possible topics for future booklets

1. PURPOSES OF MEETINGS

1.1 Introduction

Meetings are a normal, everyday part of humanitarian life. Many of us have experienced coming away from a meeting with a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, without necessarily knowing why the meeting was successful. Perhaps all of us at sometime remember leaving a meeting with feelings of anger and frustration, wondering what could have been done to have produced a better outcome.

These guidelines are intended to help relative beginners to meetings management avoid some of the pitfalls, to present some best practices, and to help experienced chairpersons, administrators and recorders of minutes do an even better job. Participants should also be able to gain more from formal meetings, and to help the process towards a successful outcome.

1.2 Meeting Purposes

Formal meetings take place when people agree to meet for a specific purpose in a set place at a specific time. Such meetings deal with formal agenda items in a systematic manner. But participants and meeting officials may also have their own hidden agendas, perhaps hoping to take the opportunity to air ideas not necessarily related to the matters intended for discussion. These hidden agendas can be legitimate or illegitimate and chairpersons will need to be aware of these possibilities while attempting to complete the formal agenda on time.

Meetings may be arranged for several reasons of which the following list includes some, but not necessarily all, of the main ones:

- To exchange or discuss ideas
- To inform or raise awareness
- To negotiate positions
- To solve problems
- To cover or review a range of different routine issues
- To plan a future activity

To welcome and introduce new staff/visitors, build relationships, review progress; discuss budgets, strategies, domestic arrangements, outcomes, and planning, and to finalise decision-making processes

Meetings may range from a small group of staff that meet regularly and frequently, to many hundreds of people attending an annual general meeting for the main purpose of receiving progress reports, and electing officials. Similar guidelines can be applied to both of these situations. However, it is important to determine at the earliest stage of planning, whether a meeting is really necessary at all. Potential costs (money, people's time) may indicate that objectives can be reached adequately by the use of a chat in the corridor, a circulated document or a telephone conference.

Telephone conferencing is becoming increasingly available in many countries. Video conferencing requires a microphone, a digital camera, appropriate software and a fast

Better Ways to Manage Meetings

internet connection. These systems can work well especially with relatively small numbers of people who are geographically widely separated, saving travel time, costs and jet lag.

Potential Costs and Benefits of Meetings

COSTS	BENEFITS
Waste time	Inform
Waste money and diverts attention from important tasks	Analyse and solve problems
Slow down progress and delay action	Discuss and share views
Are divisive	Motivate
Lower morale	Reconcile conflict
Provide a platform for the talkative and disruptive	Obtain feedback
Breed office politics	Persuade
Create muddle and chaos	Train and develop
Generate paperwork and other tasks	Prompt change in knowledge, skills and attitudes
Confirm prejudices	Allow consensus to be obtained openly

1.3 Important Preliminaries

There are two decisions that need to be made at the outset. Once the need for a physical and formal meeting has been determined, the first important task is to establish the purpose and the expected outcome or outcomes of the meeting. These must be clearly understood by all concerned, for without these the meeting is unlikely to prove valuable. If common objectives are shared prior to a meeting, the 'flow' will certainly be better. Second, the people invited to attend must be given careful thought. (The number of participants will depend upon the organising body and the reason the meeting has been called). Is their presence essential? Can they afford the time? Will they be needed for all or only part of the meeting? Have all the stakeholders been considered? Will all the different interested groups be represented in the right balance? How many in total will be expected to attend? How will the attendees be informed of the purpose and expected outcome? How will they know what preparation (reading documents, obtaining information) is required of them?

2. THE MEETING PLACE

2.1 Choice of Location

Care must be taken when choosing and deciding on the location of the meeting place if meetings are to work with maximum efficiency and effect. You must be sure that all participants can access the meeting. Locations can vary depending on the country, available facilities and other circumstances. Neutral territory may be preferred if participants are divided for any reason. If some do not have their own vehicles, or a lift from others, then availability of public transport must be required. Humanitarian workers are often involved with physically disabled people who may need wheel-chair access, special toilet or other facilities.

Better Ways to Manage Meetings

Most meetings need private space. However, some are better held in public to allow discussion to be heard openly, so that members of the general community, not directly involved in the meeting, appreciate that agendas concerning themselves are not 'hidden'. Yet, open-air meetings can only be held with consideration for the weather or the need for a generator if certain visual aids or lighting are required. However, even indoor meetings may be halted by the noise of rain on a tin roof!

Outside or inside, weather conditions, temperature, mud, bad smells, lighting and generator (noise) can all be disruptive to meetings. If meetings are disturbed, the chairperson should obtain agreement from all participants, and then relocate or reschedule to ensure a productive continuation and outcome.

Consider the space:

- Big enough? Space for small group discussions?
- Columns in the way?
- Windows (use of wall space for maps, charts etc.)
- Proximity to noisy/smelly areas
- Traffic patterns and public transport
- Location of toilets
- Wall space and surface. Floor space for observers and wheelchair participants
- Electrical outlets
- Lighting
- Temperature control/fans

2.2 Room Layout

Meeting organisers should choose the layout that is best for the occasion so that all can hear the proceedings, see visual aids or engage in small group discussions as appropriate. Possible arrangements include:

- **Classroom style.** Seating arranged in straight lines with chairperson at the front.
- **Palais style.** Lines are curved to allow participants to see and hear each other more easily.
- **In-the-round.** A circular arrangement lets all have eye contact, and reduces the dominance of the chairperson.
- **Small group/cafe style.** Small individual tables place people in groups as in a café.
- **The doughnut.** Participants are seated in a rectangle or circle of tables with a central space.
- **The horseshoe.** All sit around a large central table. The chairperson may be at one end or in the center of a long side.

Better Ways to Manage Meetings

Many serious, formal village-level meetings are **floor-based**. Floor seating may require mats for comfortable informality or formality. A single mat provides a centre of focus. Lastly, attention should be given to factors that can help or hinder the progress of the meeting. Some participants may be advised to reposition themselves in order to see visual aids more easily.

2.3 Domestic Arrangements

Provision of tea, coffee, lunch, sweets or water can all support a comfortable atmosphere that can help the business of the meeting proceed smoothly. Make sure that caterers are primed with break times and stress prompt service. For some meetings pens, paper or other materials such as folders may be needed or even expected. Where time must be saved, or numbers are large, the use of nametags for clothing or tables can speed introductions between unfamiliar individuals.

3. THE AGENDA

3.1 Notifying Participants

As well as indicating the organisation/structure of the meeting, one function of the agenda is to notify others of the forthcoming arrangements. The agenda can be posted on a notice board or distributed. This should be done at least one week before the meeting (at the latest, two days) to allow people to make arrangements for travel, obtaining/reading documents, personal work allocation, or cover. The agenda may need an accompanying explanation stating the purpose and expected outcome if it is the first of a series, or a single event. For the benefit of newcomers, the agenda can be accompanied by the minutes of the previous meeting. This will provide information about the kind of matters that are discussed, and the names of the other participants.

3.2 Document Identification

It is most important to date all documents and indicate the source or author. This is particularly significant during emergency situations, or when meetings concern security conditions that are changing rapidly. In these circumstances meetings can be frequent, so the current agenda and associated documents should be clearly identifiable. (Much time can be wasted, even dangerously, in trying to work out which document is current). Furthermore, participants may wish to contact the source in order to ensure adequate preparation or obtain clarification. So every document in a well-organised office will include a date, the sender's name, name(s) of recipient(s), and the action expected.

It is self evident that the agenda should indicate clearly the date, time, duration and place of the meeting. In addition, to help successors, or in anticipation of others having to retrieve documents in case of leave/sickness/end of contract/death, use of the 'Footer' can include the computer location where the document can be found. The footer can also be used to ensure that the name, date and page number occur on all pages of a multi-page document (that has a habit of losing first or last pages!)

3.3 Agenda Structure

There are several possible formats in which an agenda can be produced. Print should be large and items spaced to fill the page. (Try to leave enough space between points to allow participants to write their own comments). Information might include:

- **Date, time, and place** of meeting
- **The language medium** so expatriate time is not wasted
- Expected **duration** of the meeting
- In the case of a new meeting, **purpose and expected outcome**
- **Introductions** if necessary. Some meeting organisers list the names of those to whom the agenda has been sent
- **Approval of minutes** of previous meeting and corrections if necessary
- **Matters arising** from the minutes of the previous meeting. These should be of small importance. If major, they will be included in the main agenda
- **Items** should be carefully arranged in order to allow major discussions to be completed in an unhurried fashion. Contentious issues can be placed before a break to allow discussion time to be limited easily by the chairperson. Breaks can also be useful in helping cool the atmosphere if heated
- If **papers** are being provided and attached in support of items, this should be indicated alongside the item. This helps readers to prepare appropriately. (It is common but bad practice to table supporting papers at the time of the meeting. This makes no allowance for people reading at different speeds. If this is absolutely unavoidable, then the chairperson should allow time for reading. But the discussion is unlikely to be based on careful reflective thought as the time provided for reading may still be inadequate for some, and wasteful for others)
- Sometimes a **person** will be identified to deal with a particular matter, or to lead discussion on that topic. The item will also indicate this. Participants can be helpfully guided by showing approximate **discussion times** by the item; this draws attention to which matters are most or least important
- Sometimes **meetings may be divided** to allow participants (from different geographical areas, or with specific responsibilities) to attend clearly defined sections of the meeting e.g. "09.00 – 10.45 for those from the south and 11.15 – 13.00 hours for those from the north": the intervening break allows 'north' and 'south' to meet as well as providing some flexibility. In this way time wasting is minimised and the meeting can finish on time
- **Any Other Business.** This should not be used to encourage latecomers, and topics introduced at this late stage in a meeting should either be added to a future agenda, or only dealt with in emergency

Better Ways to Manage Meetings

- **Date, time and place of next meeting.** These details are most easily agreed when all participants are present, and temptations to offer phone calling to arrange details later should be resisted. (This is especially important in emergency situations when participants are likely to be spread in the field). It should be remembered that busy people are unlikely to be available at short notice and it can be difficult to make short-term future arrangements that are convenient for all. Difficulties can be avoided by planning meetings at the same time each week or month. This allows meetings to be fixed for long periods ahead. (Ideally, departments or organisations will agree an overall meetings programme and this can be most helpful where information generated from one type of meeting is required for another).

Look critically at the example of an agenda below and suggest ways in which it could be improved. Can you spot what is missing? (See 3.2 for the answer).

Staff Team Meeting

On: Monday 9 February 2004

In: Seminar Room, Accra Office

At: 09.00 to 13.00 hours

Distribution: all programme staff in Head Quarters (HQ) and Field Offices.

NB. HQ staff are requested to attend entire meeting; Field Staff to attend 1st or 2nd part as appropriate although staff may attend whole meeting if they wish. Written suggestions re Items 4 and 7 should be sent to Samuel by 16th February.

AGENDA

Chair: Samuel Abouti

1. Welcome for new staff member, Affua Tamaklo, to HQ,
2. Minutes of the meeting of Monday 2 February 2004
3. Matters arising from the minutes
4. Possible joint training activities with Seva Ghana (20 minutes)
5. Catch-up education (see Paper 1. John Aduwasi to lead discussion) (45 minutes)
 - a) In south
 - b) Single-parent women
6. Fire/First Aid Training (see Paper 2: attachment from last meeting)

10.45 – 11.15 COFFEE BREAK

7. Visit of Consortium President to Agriculture Training Programme
8. Proposal for Micro Finance Programme in the North (see Paper 3)
 - a) Planning seminar
 - b) Partners?
 - c) Funding?
9. Any Other Business
10. Chairperson and Minutes Secretary for next meeting

Next Meeting in Field Office: date, time and place

4. CHAIRING A MEETING

4.1 The Role of the Chairperson

The chairperson or meeting facilitator has many responsibilities. She/he has to prepare the agenda after giving consideration to the purpose, intended outcome and the participants. But the participants or the group may not all share the same ideals and may be present for several reasons, such as:

- Need to know
- Job requirement - (they were told to go)
- Legitimate concern and interest in the topic
- Career advancement
- Substitute for the “real” participant
- A good way to get out of other work
- Love of learning
- Some combination of the above and other reasons

As any chairperson knows, it is not easy to start the meeting on time, keep to time, and finish on time while achieving the task as well as satisfying individual and group needs. How many meetings start late because someone thinks that somebody may be coming – then they do not turn up! (Just multiply the time delay by the number of people present to find the total time wasted. Put a notional value on the average working hour of those concerned and you can see how much money and time have been wasted by late starts).

So start meetings exactly on time and after several meetings, latecomers will learn that you mean business. There are even gentle ways of making latecomers feel embarrassed, such as not leaving empty chairs, or apologizing for starting the meeting on time! Certainly, do not go over the business again for the benefit of those who could not travel with sufficient allowance for traffic etc, when others have met the deadline.

Start the meeting on a positive note by thanking participants for making the effort, and making sure that everybody knows the others, and why the meeting has been held. Take care to introduce new individuals. It is good practice to have a pack sent to newcomers so they know the framework of the business. What might be included in the pack? – mission statement of the group, dates of planned meetings, previous minutes, list of members. All this helps to get newcomers on board and active fast. This is particularly significant in the humanitarian world where contracts are short and turnover of staff is frequent.

It is strongly recommended to ask people to turn off telephones (especially if key personnel are likely to receive calls. One disturbing call can waste the time of many others).

The chairperson also needs to consider refreshment times in relation to agenda items. For longer, all-day sessions, the chairperson must start with a quick overview of the agenda including refreshment times. Try to avoid the distribution of coffee/tea, bananas, cakes etc while discussion is continuing, for obvious reasons. This does not save time, but rather leads to frustration and lack of concentration. Either stop the discussion, or take a complete

Better Ways to Manage Meetings

break. For a short meeting, refreshments can be taken before for the benefit of those who have come long distances. There is an added advantage that latecomers miss the refreshments and not the meeting!

The matter of supporting papers has been mentioned in the previous section but it is worth repeating, that supporting papers will only be supportive if time before the meeting has been given to allow participants to read the material in a careful and reflective manner. Different people read at different speeds and the meeting is not the time for reading.

4.2 Observing Protocols and Voting

There are generally accepted and standard ways of conducting meetings that allow them to proceed smoothly and efficiently. Protocols for achieving this are there to help all concerned and should not be used to stifle discussion or progress. There are two main areas of concern. The first relates to the manner in which participants communicate, and the second deals with the ways of handling proposals and amendments.

Unless small group discussions are planned as part of the arrangements, participants should only speak one at a time, or else important contributions may be lost. The sensitive chairperson will be a student of body language and be aware, by keeping an eye on all the participants, when somebody wishes to add a talking point. A person wanting to join the discussion will usually lean forward, attempt to make eye contact with the chairperson, perhaps cough or move papers or water glass to attract attention, and raise a hand or an arm. The chairperson can indicate by nodding or pointing that the individual is free to speak. Sometimes many people wish to contribute to the discussion at about the same time. If the meeting is to be kept in control, the chairperson must ask participants to indicate intention to speak by raising a hand, then noting and keeping to a strict order of the contributors.

In larger assemblies, where participants are not all in direct sight of each other, it is better for the contributing individual to stand up before speaking. Then it is easier for all to be aware of the standing contributor whose voice will be heard more clearly throughout the meeting place. In even larger assemblies, it is usual for speakers to announce their name and affiliation. This will help the hearers appreciate the background of the comment, and will also be of benefit to the person recording the minutes. Normally a presenter should direct comments to the chairperson and not to some other individual in the audience. This serves to reduce the possibility of generally unheard local conversations (that in some cases could lead to personal attacks), and for the chairperson to redirect the topic to others if appropriate.

The second important protocol concerns proposals and amendments. It is easy for the meeting to become confused if these matters are not dealt with in an orderly manner. For example, someone proposes that an agricultural project should be started in the north of the country next year. This proposal contains three ingredients: the nature of the programme, the location, and the time. Immediate voting becomes difficult when people may not agree/disagree with each of these components. Then somebody wishes to amend the proposal to suggest that the project would be more appropriate in the south, while a third person feels strongly that the project should commence this year and not next. Yet another person thinks that, if there is to be a project in the south, the proposal should be amended to education and not agriculture. Discussion becomes heated; people reiterate

Better Ways to Manage Meetings

their views not wanting their point to be lost. At some point, the chairperson must call a halt and allow voting to reach a democratic decision.

So how does the chairperson 'unpack' all the points? Experience has shown that it is better to vote first on the amendments before obtaining a decision on the main issue. One way of dealing with the complications above is to vote on the issues in the following order:

- 1 Is a project to begin this year, or next?
(i.e. When could resources/funding/capacity be available?)
- 2 Should the project be in the north or the south of the country?
(Where is the greater need? Is an initial needs assessment required?)
- 3 Then the main proposal can be presented.
Should the project be in agriculture or education?

Before voting, and if time allows after the chairperson has clarified the decision point, further discussion, for clarification only, can be allowed. At this stage it is usually wise to allow a person to speak only once, otherwise some may attempt to force opinion by force of voice! Often, at this stage, there are some who would like to change the order of voting. But if two people sit on a horse, only one can be in front, and it is essential for the chairperson to keep the lead. This does not mean that the most senior person must always be in the chair.

The voting follows by a show of hands (or use of ballot papers in large general and formal situations), recording those who are for, against, or abstaining. It is important to note abstentions, as a simple majority of 'fors' may not truly reflect the will of the meeting if the number of abstentions is high. In fact, the chairperson needs to make clear, before the voting takes place, what is required for an acceptable majority decision.

Give thought to the **voting process**. In delicate situations voting should be anonymous as voters can be influenced in their decision if they know others can see which way they are voting. Furthermore, even in democratic situations, it may not be desirable for junior staff to be seen to vote against the opinion of their seniors.

Once the voting has taken place, no further discussion is appropriate. The decisions have been taken and there is neither need nor use in allowing a minority, who may feel aggrieved, to have the opportunity to reiterate their position.

4.3 Managing the Meeting

The work of the chairperson is far from easy and practice is required to find the balance between encouraging the quiet ones, limiting the outspoken, and not taking the opportunity of the dominant position in the meeting also to dominate the discussion. The latter is particularly difficult when the chairperson may be better informed on a topic than others. Many meetings should be run on democratic lines and all opinions carefully heard and discussed. At other times the chairperson may need to be authoritative, taking decisions in a required time, controlling content, or disciplining unacceptable behaviour. Issues need to be highlighted and summarised so that all are kept in the conceptual arena. Special care and patience must be given to those who may be communicating in their second or third language.

Better Ways to Manage Meetings

When numbers are large and time is short, there may be a need to ask participants to speak only once on a topic. This can be particularly important when interpretation is required.

When the atmosphere is most energetic, or even **heated**, sometimes it is better to postpone the decision-making process. Decisions are best taken when tempers are cool and calm. In extreme cases it may be necessary to take the matter to a higher forum for a decision to be reached.

When some participants are not participating, give pointed opportunity by requesting views from individuals or organisations. And give encouragement to the responses. Some participants hold back because they:

- Fear rejection
- Feel pressure from other more senior people
- Lack preparation
- Have an incomplete understanding of what has gone before

Perhaps the culture makes it unlikely that **women** would express opinions. Or their opinions would not be considered seriously. So you may need to take steps. This is what you could do: discuss with them how their views can be heard. They might want time to meet before the official meeting to sort out their opinions; or time allocated in the meeting to ensure they could speak without interruptions. Or they might want a good-hearted male person to speak for them. Or they might have other ideas.

When actions have been decided, identify the person responsible and clarify the action required, and by when. Sometimes it is good to provide a 'supporter' who also checks that action has been taken!

This is an oversimplification of meeting facilitation as any chairperson knows, and there are many **impediments** to the process. Several techniques are used to disrupt meetings. They can occur at any time, often unexpectedly, and the chairperson must be prepared for:

- Personal attacks
- Sleeping
- Abusive speech/behaviors
- Filibusters (a person who uses, or even abuses, procedures to delay the process)
- Nay sayers
- Latecomers

The smart chairperson will:

- Identify potential problems before they occur – talk through the agenda with participants beforehand if possible.
- Take pre-emptive action

Better Ways to Manage Meetings

- Keep calm and not panic.
- Maintain a sense of humor
- Be willing to change to a better plan

If matters become really serious then:

- Deal with it outside the room.
- Call a break if necessary
- Set up a group task force
- Enrol the help of other participants
- Set up a committee or small group to represent participants' particular needs or interests
- Remain neutral. Do not take sides generally, but be prepared to take assertive authority if the occasion demands

If confronted with complete disorder and disruption,

- Never get upset or emotional yourself
- Isolate one element and try to deal with it to reduce the overall temperature
- Agree before resuming
- Call for a few minutes of complete silence
- Call a short break
- Put the item aside until later
- Abandon the meeting

The good chairperson is creative and will:

- Always remain in control of time
- Actively stimulate creative thinking
- Personally contribute new ideas or steer the discussion in new or unusual directions
- Find new ways of looking at things
- Consider novel approaches and give them a chance
- Aim to solve problems, not tread familiar pathways

4.4 Concluding the Meeting

A well-directed meeting will have:

- Focused better on its objectives
- Fostered more constructive discussions

Better Ways to Manage Meetings

- Lead to a thorough review so that *ad hoc* decisions are avoided
- Encouraged all sides of the argument or case to be considered
- Resulted from business-like proceedings

At the end of the meeting the chairperson should:

- Review the key decisions
- Indicate issues for future discussion
- Fix time and place of next meeting.
Remember that this is particularly important in emergency situations
- Thank the participants for coming
- Declare that the meeting has ended.
(If this sounds a little heavy or obvious, wish participants something pleasant so that the meeting starts and finishes on a positive note, even if the middle part has been difficult to handle!

5. MEETING RECORDS

5.1 Types of Minutes

Without a written record of the proceedings the intentions of the meeting will almost certainly be lost. If minutes are not kept, hours of time may be wasted by rediscussion at a later date, or argument occurs about what was actually agreed. Several different kinds of minutes can be recorded. At one extreme there can be a full record of all the discussion on almost a word for word basis. This is usually unnecessary: ideas develop and opinions change during the discussion. Progress and improvement develop from a conflict of views, and usually there is little need for or value in recording the modifications of views as they occur.

So the group or the chairperson needs to agree the nature of the records. These can be:

- A **word for word account**. This may only have value in reporting a highly contentious and significant discussion of extreme importance e.g. when two political or warring parties are being brought together, or when a prisoner is interviewed by the police. In such situations it is best to use a tape recorder for later transcription. But be consistent when deciding to use first or second names, and the name of the organisation
- If a **relatively full account** is needed in a situation less important than the above, just the main arguments can be recorded that led to a particular conclusion or decision being taken
- Most usual are **minutes** that only record attendance, apologies for absence, decisions and required actions, and details of the next meeting; this is sufficient for most routine situations

Better Ways to Manage Meetings

- Of great value when time is short and people are under pressure is the **tabular form of minutes**. This method is under-utilised. The table can be completed during the course of the meeting, photocopied and distributed immediately. The table includes the key agenda points, a required action, who is responsible, and the agreed date by which the action will be completed.

Minutes of Programme Staff Meeting: Accra HQ on 04.11.2011 at 09-11.00 hours			
Agenda item	Action required	Person responsible	To be completed by:
3. NGO Vehicles	Replace tyres on car	John Brown	04.12.2011
5. Budget	Draft WatSan proposal	Sally Baidoo	11.12.2011
Etc.....			
Michael Wahid (Chair)			

- For ease of reference the numbering of Minute Items should correspond exactly with the numbers used in the Agenda.
- Number all pages. The format '1 of 5, 2 of 5 etc' is useful as it makes clear if pages are missing or duplicated.

5.2 Distribution of Minutes

Minutes are best circulated within 24 hours of the meeting. Rapid distribution gives maximum time for actions to be effected while the matter is still fresh in mind. Sending out the minutes with the next agenda just before the next meeting is common practice but is usually too late to be effective.

A useful way to be sure that minutes are distributed to all attendees is to ask all participants to sign an attendance sheet giving postal or email addresses. If the meeting has been interpreted, then the minutes will also need to be translated before distribution.

For meetings that may have a highly significant impact, it is sometimes useful to indicate that minutes are in draft form until they have been agreed. Another approach is to send out minutes to a limited group for feedback or correction before they are finally distributed to the wider audience. If this is done, the process must be clearly transparent and the meeting should be informed before this occurs.

6. CHECK-LIST OF ACTIONS REQUIRED

6.1 Decisions and Actions to be Taken

- Determine the purpose(s) and expected outcome(s)
- Decide who should be invited and the total attendance anticipated

Better Ways to Manage Meetings

- Book the location; check audio-visual aids and materials required (flip chart, pencils/ball pens, pads, name labels etc)
- Arrange refreshments (water, sweets, tea, coffee, biscuits, lunch arrangements), and decide their timing in relation to the agenda
- Draft agenda
- Select a secretary to distribute the agenda and take minutes. (The most useful person will be competent and have a knowledge of the subject)
- Prepare papers to be attached to agenda items for precirculation
- Finalise the agenda and circulate. Post a copy on a notice board
- Arrive at the meeting place early to check room or space is available and that domestic arrangements (audio-visual aids/name tags/seating) are in order
- Start the meeting exactly on time
- Ask all to turn off mobile telephones

6.2 Actions to Avoid

Many problems in meeting organisation arise from leaving decisions and actions too late for general comfort. So avoid:

- Delays in making decisions about the need for, purpose and expected outcomes of meetings
- Leaving bookings for rooms, domestic arrangements, visual aids until the last minute
- Presenting supporting papers at the meeting. People cannot read them while concentrating on the matters under discussion. If extreme circumstances force papers to be tabled, chairpersons must allow time for them to be read, making special allowance for those whose native language is not that used in the paper. Tabled papers can cause confusion, disruption, and raise suspicions that an item is being 'bulldozed'. To ensure that papers are always precirculated, either with or even before the agenda, allow time for electrical/photocopier/postal and other failures.

A good meeting needs concentration and interruptions must be minimized.

- Don't be sidetracked
- Beware of meetings within meetings. Insist that participants speak only once to a topic if individuals are getting repetitive or too dominant
- Beware of digressions

7. A FINAL WORD TO PARTICIPANTS

Each time a meeting is convened, ask yourself:

- Is it really necessary to attend? (Make a conscious decision about attending)
- What can I contribute?
- What can I get from it?

Come to definite answers before you set out. And be determined to go to the meeting on time, not late! If you arrive early, then use the time to network and the time will not be wasted.

- Read supporting papers in advance
- Prepare your contribution controlling your nerves
- Annotate any relevant documents and make notes as necessary
- Plan questions that you will need to ask
- Note who will attend
- Put information over in a way that is explicit, accurate and precise
- If your name is put against an action point, then take seriously the responsibility to follow up with action, and complete the task in time **Do not**
- Monopolize the conversation
- Talk to the person next to you during the meeting
- Constantly interrupt others
- Become emotional or argumentative to no good purpose
- Make it difficult to stick to the allotted time
- Appear unprepared, undisciplined or a troublemaker
- Digress pointlessly from the topic

8. HELPFUL INFORMATION SOURCES

Web Sites

www.aidworkers.net This is a free site with about 8000 members. It contains news of humanitarian issues, and a valuable forum where questions can be posed eliciting practical answers.

www.ausaid The site is big but time invested is well spent in order to find manuals on proposal writing and other areas.

www.networklearning.org A relatively new site containing distance-learning materials and other manuals that can be freely downloaded.

www.redr.org/training RedR-IHE runs a comprehensive programme of training courses for aid workers both in Sri Lanka and world-wide. The 3 day course 'Managing People and Projects', for example, covers key management tools appropriate to humanitarian work.

www.sphereproject.org This is the site of the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards. It contains a variety of information and training materials including exercises on meeting management.

www.the-ecentre.net The eCentre is the UNHCR Regional Centre for Emergency Training. It offers training, distance learning and Internet programmes for emergency managers and other humanitarian workers.

www.videoarts.co.uk This is the web site of the organisation that produces the John Cleese management training films including the excellent 'Meetings, Bloody Meetings'. The web site also contains useful free management training resources under the 'Think Tank' section.

