

Agenda Planning

An agenda serves as a group's plan of action. Having a planned agenda allows a group to use its members' gifts of time, wisdom and energy wisely.

Common Practices

In some churches and church groups, meetings are held without much thought having been given to the agenda. Certain items are expected: prayer, reading of the minutes, treasurer's report. When people arrive, they may be asked for items to be placed on the agenda, and those are noted. Sometimes the chairperson brings up items left from preceding meetings ("old business") and opens up the floor to "new business" when anyone can bring items for consideration. When there is no agreed-upon agenda, people often are frustrated by rambling reports, don't know what is expected of them and have concerns that don't get heard. Most often, committee members expect only the chairperson to know what's going to be on the agenda before the meeting.

In some churches, committee chairpersons meet with the pastor to discuss committee mission objectives and agendas before each meeting. Sometimes the agenda is mailed to members along with background papers for study and review. (E-mail works well when possible.) At other times it is handed out, or written on newsprint or a chalkboard, at the meeting. Committee members are given an opportunity at the beginning

of the meeting to add items to the agenda if they haven't been asked to submit items earlier.

For many people, planning an agenda means listing the items to be considered by the group. Others develop an agenda with more information, by listing items in the order they will be considered, perhaps giving the time that they estimate consideration will take, and stating what type of outcome is needed. Examples are decision, referral, evaluation, input, etc. (See the sample agenda which follows.)

Parts of Meetings

Most meetings can be divided into three sections:

- The beginning is a time to focus on the group's life and the meeting's purpose. During the early part of the meeting you can worship, build community, learn about your faith, review minutes of the previous meeting, clarify the purpose of the meeting, build the agenda and hear reports. People will be more willing to participate in freewheeling discussions then later in the meeting when they are beginning to feel pressured by time limits.
- The middle portion is the time for all issues requiring major attention and action. If there are items that will take a long time or cause controversy, schedule them after shorter items. Then you can feel you have accomplished something and won't get caught with several

things that must be considered but with no time or energy to deal with them.

- The concluding part of the meeting is the time for routine actions or those that require less attention. People are thinking about getting out, and they tend to whiz through the items, no matter how important they are. You may summarize what's been accomplished, make or review assignments, determine the date for the next meeting, and have closing worship or prayer. If there are items that you don't absolutely have to discuss, they can be scheduled toward the end of the meeting with the understanding that they may be postponed.

Ways to Increase the Effectiveness of the Agenda

Using an agenda that includes more than the order of the items helps focus the meeting. You can work at preparing an **action agenda** that gives:

- Each issue, including routine ones.
- The name of the person who will present the issue.
- The time you think it will take to consider the issue, or an assigned amount of time. A time limit helps focus discussion or reports. Sometimes you need more time than is available. That's when you may need to say, "Today we will be able to talk about the hand bell

choir's tour for ten minutes. We'll also have it on next month's agenda." When there is a major consideration, sensitivity is needed to insure that sufficient time is given to it.

- The action required. You may be sharing information, asking for evaluation, reporting action, distributing materials, making a recommendation or asking for a decision. It really helps the group to know what they are trying to accomplish, so they know when they've finished their work. If you want only to report on the hand bell choir's itinerary, there's no need for people to suggest additional performance sites. If people know you aren't asking for recommendations they will be less likely to give them.
 - Assignments, outcomes and follow-through for implementation. These categories are filled in at the meeting when decisions are made. Once you have determined all the items that you want to consider, you'll need to set some priorities. You may want to break the items into three categories:
 - Items we must address.
 - Items we ought to address.
 - Items it would be nice to address.Use these categories to help you decide whether to place the issues at the beginning, middle or end of the meeting.
- After you have all this information you can put together an action agenda. Don't expect to prepare the entire agenda alone. Ask each person

who wants to present something for consideration to prepare a written statement to distribute in advance.

The statement should give background information, describe the current situation, outline possible actions and consequences and tell the recommended action. If information hasn't been prepared in writing, presenters can be asked to have that information ready to outline at the meeting. A worksheet given to presenters might look like this:

- I want to talk about...
- Background information...
- Current situation...
- Possible actions and consequences...
- Recommended action...
- Outcome... (to be filled in at the meeting)
- Assignments... (to be filled in at the meeting)

Skills and Attributes Needed

In order to prepare an agenda, you'll need:

- Knowledge of how groups work.
- Ability to consult with others.
- Understanding of the people in the group.
- Understanding of the mission of the group.
- Sensitivity to the need of people to be heard.
- Ability to stick to the agenda without being dictatorial.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Read **Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations** by Susan Farnham, et.al, (Morehouse Publishing, 1999).
- Read **Attentive to God: Spirituality in the Church Committee** for specific suggestions for a variety of committees. By Karen Marie Yust, (Chalice Press, 2001).
- Attend workshops on agenda building sponsored by your conference or association or other groups.
- Invite a consultant (or a respected and knowledgeable member) to meet with all committee chairpersons to practice agenda setting.
- Practice setting action agendas.

Issues Facing the Church

- People who set agendas can use them to manipulate the meeting for negative purposes and to avoid issues. How can this be prevented?
- Most groups agree on the importance of community building, or group building, at the beginning of meetings. How can you balance the need of people to know, understand and value one another with the need for tasks to be done?
- Worship is a vital part of the community life of church members.

It also contributes to an attitude of discerning God's will and direction rather than individuals' interests being most important. How can it be incorporated into the life of committees so that it doesn't seem to be rushed through or tacked on?

Questions

- What is included in an action agenda that you have not been including in your agenda?
- How does an action agenda help committed members in their responsibilities?
- What can you do to improve your next meeting's agenda preparation?

Sample Agenda for a Governing Board Meeting

(These sections to be filled in at the meeting as decisions are made)

| Time | Item/Nature | Presenter | Action Requested | Decision Made | Assignment & Follow Through |
|-------------|---|------------------|--|----------------------|--|
| 7:00 | Call to order | chairperson | | | |
| 7:02 | Minutes of previous meeting | secretary | review/approve | | |
| 7:05 | Treasurer's report | treasurer | review/approve | | |
| 7:10 | Devotions | Edna Smith | | | |
| 7:20 | Repair bell tower (<i>old business</i>) | trustees | decision on bid | | |
| 8:00 | One Great Hour of Sharing (<i>new business</i>) | mission | recommendation of \$ amount | | |
| 8:20 | Long-range planning (<i>presentation</i>) | chairperson | decision on whether to conduct long-range planning process | | |
| 9:30 | Other Business | | | | |
| 9:45 | Adjourn | chairperson | | | |