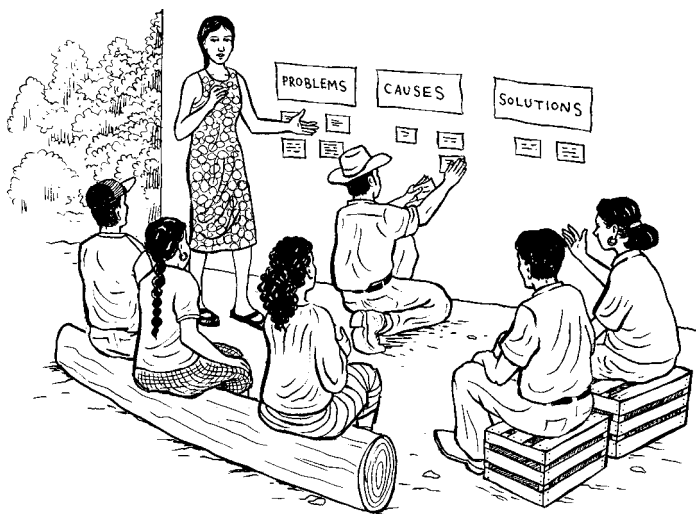


## Appendix B

# Good Meetings, from Start to Finish



A good meeting engages everyone — and together we can tackle problems that we could never solve alone!

## Planning a meeting

A well-planned training or meeting runs smoothly while encouraging everyone to participate. Meetings that are confusing, without goals, too long, or dominated by one person can make people feel discouraged and unwilling to return. But a well-planned meeting is energizing, participatory, and inspiring.

Steps to plan a meeting or training include:

- Invite people to the meeting who will be affected by the decisions to be made.
- Plan for providing child care and, if needed, food and drinks for participants.
- Build an agenda based on topics people want to discuss.
- Use activities to make the group comfortable and excited about working together;
- Think about what problems might come up and rehearse how to handle them.



## Build an agenda

Building an agenda (a plan for the meeting) in advance will help the meeting run smoothly. Before the meeting, ask people who will attend what topics they would like to discuss in the meeting and try to include them in the agenda. Decide what time the meeting will start and end. Plan the meeting to stick to those times to be considerate of the participants.

For each agenda item, have a desired decision or outcome — what will people learn from each agenda item, and how will it move the group’s purpose forward? Then, determine how much time will be spent on each item. A good agenda allows time for people to reflect on and build from their own life experiences while they learn new information.

Agenda items can be organized to help avoid group exhaustion. If you start with small agenda items and announcements, or topics that can easily be decided, the group will feel accomplished from the start! Save the big conversations for later, but not so late that people will be tired. Create opportunities for people to share their ideas in smaller and large groups, to move their bodies, and to be creative. Plan for short breaks and activities to energize the group every hour or so.

Writing down a plan for the meeting, including goals, notes, and what materials are needed, can help you visualize the flow of the meeting. It will also help you remember the plan during the meeting!

Time	Activity name	Purpose/goal	Detail/notes	Materials
10 minutes	"The strong wind blows"	Ice breaker		Chairs
30 minutes	Role play activity	Practice conversation between sexual partners	10 minutes to discuss phrases to practice using	Costumes
20 minutes	Wrap up and reflection	Check in with people to see how the activity felt	Note areas of remaining discomfort for future	
5 minutes	Plan for next meeting	Decide on date, place and topic		

## Prepare yourself to talk about difficult topics

Think ahead about whether you are prepared to discuss planned agenda items. It is normal to find some topics difficult, uncomfortable or upsetting to discuss, but as a facilitator it is important to feel comfortable enough with the topic that you can help the group with their discussion.

As you are preparing a meeting, ask yourself:

- What do I think about this topic?
- Do I have strong feelings or judgments that might get in the way of allowing everyone to express their views? What can I do to ensure that this does not happen?
- Is this a topic I am uncomfortable with? Will my discomfort make others too uncomfortable to have an open discussion? How can I make others feel it is OK to have an open discussion?

Seek support from someone else to help you prepare for difficult topics. You can also ask someone else to help you lead the discussion if you think you will not be comfortable with the points of view that may be raised.

See pages 82 to 83 for more advice about preparing yourself for uncomfortable or difficult discussions.

## Keep it moving forward!

As facilitator, your role is to keep the group on track to accomplish its goals. You help move the meeting along, but the group provides the content. As a trainer, you may also be sharing information, but there should still be space for the wisdom of the group to emerge. Here are some ideas about how to help the group move through the different stages of a meeting.

### Starting the meeting

Consider starting with an opening reflection or activity that sets the tone for the session. This can be a poem, a song, a ritual, silence, a prayer, or a quick game — whatever helps people reflect on what they are about to do. Activities that help people get to know each other, sometimes called “ice breakers,” help people feel more relaxed and ready to participate in group discussions.

For an example of an ice breaker activity, see “The strong wind blows” (page 320).

At the beginning of the meeting:

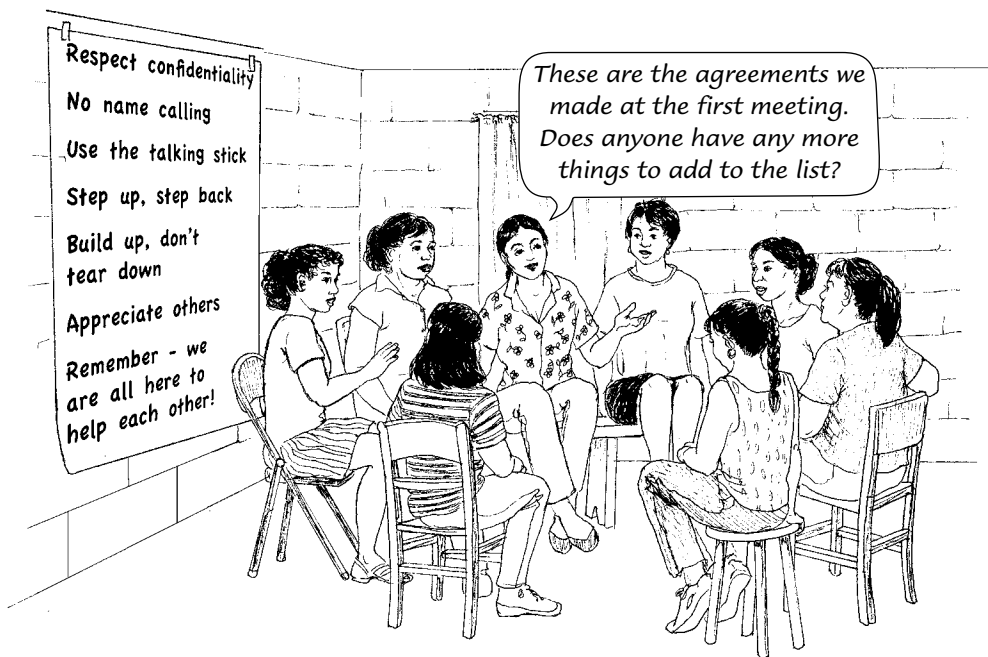
- **Ask for a volunteer to take notes** on what the group discusses and agrees upon.
- **Review the agenda** with the group and ask if there are any other items that need to be added. If there are, adjust the agenda and time to include the new item. Get the group’s agreement that the agenda is complete before proceeding.
- **Check for “hangovers,”** or left over feelings or questions from previous discussions, before beginning a new session. Ask people to share how things have been for them since the last meeting, and if there have been significant changes. Ask if they have talked to anyone about the group’s issues and what happened. Take time to address hangovers, even if it slows down the new agenda.

*I used to find it difficult to know if the group needed time to talk about their feelings from previous discussions. I learned that silence doesn’t always mean people don’t have anything to say, just that sometimes they need a few minutes to think.*



## Create group agreements

If this is the first meeting, remember to make time at the beginning of the meeting to create group agreements for everyone to follow. This way, if someone is talking too much, or personally criticizing another participant, you can remind them about the agreements the group has made. For more about group agreements, see page 84.



## Follow the agenda and address unplanned items

Your role as a facilitator is to help the group follow the planned agenda and to help them avoid becoming stuck or distracted. Before moving on to a new topic or the next step in the agenda, be sure to summarize the discussion and any decisions that were made. Ask the group if there are concerns or questions that need to be addressed or kept track of for future discussion.

Even with the best planned agenda, unplanned issues come up, or an agenda item needs more time for discussion than anticipated. If this happens, as the facilitator, you can suggest a change in the agenda to the group and ask for their agreement about this change. Or you can ask the group if they would like to change the agenda based on what they feel is most important.

## Making decisions

During a meeting, the group will need to decide what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, and who will do it. Help the group agree upon how it will make decisions — does everyone have to agree, or does the majority rule?

Voting can be a long process, and sometimes people are reluctant to vote, especially if they are undecided. To gauge whether people are ready to vote, do a “go around” in a circle and have everyone share their opinion, or take a “straw poll” (an unofficial, preliminary vote) by raising hands so everyone can see who is in favor or against and how close the group is to agreement. When making decisions by voting, it is best to try to reach a decision that everyone can live with. If there is an even split or a very small majority, the group may want to take time and further discuss the issue before voting.

Much of a group’s work happens between meetings. So it may also be important for the group to decide how decisions will be made between meetings. Will there be committees to make decisions, or will specific people be assigned responsibility for decision making?

## Closing the meeting

Try to conclude each meeting in a way that fosters reflection and evaluation.

It is valuable to have participants share what they have learned during the meeting, how they feel, and to reflect on how it relates to their life. If people are comfortable sharing these reflections with each other, it can help the entire group to move from reflection to action. Head, heart, hands (page 236) is one example of an activity that helps a group do this.

Evaluating the meeting is also important. If people can give honest feedback about how they think they have worked together, and the new ideas and strategies that have emerged, they can better identify next steps in their learning and organizing work.



*At the end of each meeting, I ask:  
What worked? What didn't? How  
could things be improved?*

Remind everyone about the spiral process, and how group reflection and analysis of our experience is essential to plan for new action (see Organizing is a process, page 34).

## Creating closure

There are many ways to create closure and affirm the unity of the group at the end of a workshop or meeting. You can encourage people to share appreciations of each other and what they have learned. Or consider ending with a closing poem, reflection, or song, or whatever fits the group's needs.

*Say one way you have been changed by our discussion, and then light your candle. Each of us will take turns until all of our candles are lit. How is our light sharing similar to what we have done here today?*



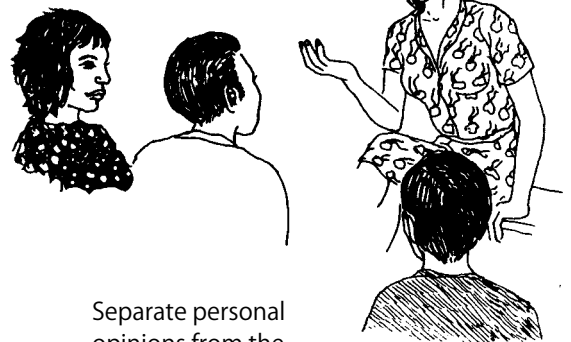
## The role of a facilitator

The role of a facilitator is to:

- help the group come to the best decisions possible.
- keep the conversation on topic.
- deal with conflicts or interruptions to the group's agenda.
- help participants hear and better understand each other.

The facilitator needs to understand how differences in power play out in the group. She should point out when people do not follow the agreements about group behavior that members have made.

*I would like to give my opinion. Can someone take over running the meeting for a minute?*



Separate personal opinions from the role of facilitating.

Here is some advice from popular educators about leading group discussions:



*I want everyone to understand what is going on, so I use plain language and explain why I am doing what I am doing.*

*I encourage the group to think about solutions by reminding them of ideas they thought up throughout the meeting.*



*Instead of correcting people or sharing my opinion, I repeat what they say and ask “Why do you believe that?” or “Can you explain more about that?” to show that I value what they have to say.*

*Watching people’s body language tells me what the group needs. If people are looking away, frowning, or asleep, I ask the group to tell me how they are feeling or what is going on for them. Then we can all talk about what to do.*



*If you don’t know the answer to a question, that is OK! Tell people you will try to find out during a break or afterwards — or you can invite someone with that information to join you at the next meeting.*

## Encourage participation

Group discussions work best when everyone participates as fully and equally as possible, even if they have a hard time doing this. Good facilitators remind people that everyone’s ideas are valuable and worth sharing, whether or not they have had the opportunity to go to school, or feel like they have less power than others. Encouraging participation is one of your most important roles, especially with people who do not know how to read, feel uncomfortable speaking in groups, or are new to the group.

There are many ways to encourage participation in groups:

**Arrange seating differently**, as demonstrated in the fishbowl activity (page 186). For group discussions, make sure the participants are facing each other, not just you, by arranging them in a circle or rows facing each other.

**Give people a moment to prepare their thoughts** by allowing time to think quietly before starting a discussion on a major issue or decision. When people speak, they will be better prepared and more confident in their opinions.





**Create 'break out' groups** to discuss issues in small groups of two or three people that then report back to the larger group. People often feel more comfortable sharing a group opinion than stating their own.

**Art, drama, movement and music** during meetings are powerful ways to tap people's creative energy and get them talking. They are also great ways to communicate messages to others. You can make community murals (page 10), posters (page 69), collages (page 279), videos (page 165), and dramas (page 122).

Each person has something to add to a meeting, and allowing people to explore different roles can help the group figure out what people are good at. Everyone can take turns facilitating, taking notes, reminding people about the next meeting, preparing food, or gathering supplies. Draw upon people's strengths and acknowledge everyone's hard work, no matter how well they do a task.

## Solve problems that happen during meetings

Even with the best plan, things can happen unexpectedly that disrupt a meeting. People may behave in ways that are challenging for the facilitator and for other participants. Some topics may bring up unpleasant feelings or conflict in a group.

When someone becomes upset during a meeting, be compassionate, respectful, and offer to help. Someone might react or become upset because of a problem she experiences currently or something painful in her past. For example, if someone has experienced police violence, a discussion about violence in the community might bring up feelings of fear or anger. She may want to explain why she is upset and have her feelings acknowledged by the group. Allow a few minutes for this. You can offer to talk privately with her after the meeting and then, if necessary, refer her to someone who might be able to give ongoing help.

When someone in a group talks too much, it can prevent other people from sharing their ideas. If you suspect that one person's excessive talking is discouraging other people from talking, you can ask that person to respect a time limit or point out that other people need a chance to speak.

## Work through conflict

Sometimes, someone in a group may act in an angry or disrespectful way to others, or say things that are upsetting to other participants — for example saying something that undermines women’s health and rights. Helping a group deal with these types of conflicts can be challenging, but it is also necessary in order to help the group function well and accomplish its goals.

When someone says something disrespectful or starts arguing with someone else, as a facilitator you must try to stay calm and keep your face and body language neutral. Look at other people in the group to see how they are responding. If they do not look upset or have no reaction, you may want let the issue go, especially if it is unrelated to the topic being discussed.

If people look upset, you will want to explore the topic before moving on to the next agenda item. You can ask the person who has made the statement for clarification: “What in your experience makes you say that?” Try to understand what is at the root of the person’s opinion. Restate what the person said to show that you are listening. Often, when people are angry, showing them they are heard can calm them down. If they do not calm down after you do this, you may have to ask them to give others a turn to speak.

Once the person calms down, solicit other people’s ideas by asking, “Would anyone like to share what they think about this?” Although it may be difficult, do not share your own opinions during this part of the conversation.



After discussing the problem for a few minutes, ask people if they feel comfortable moving on to the next topic, reminding them of the agreed-upon agenda and schedule. Allow the group more time to talk about the issue if need be, and let the group know they can also talk after the meeting or add the issue to the agenda of a future meeting.

Sometimes there are people in meetings who seem to enjoy causing trouble or making others upset. If your group has rules about participation in meetings, you can point out that the person is not following the group agreements. You may have to be forceful. You can say that other participants seem to be upset, and that as the facilitator, you feel that it is best to continue the conversation after the meeting.

When there is significant conflict or disagreement in a group, it may be challenging to address or resolve the issue during a single meeting. If further discussion is needed, or if any planned agenda items don't get talked about because other discussions went on longer, post a list of those topics on the wall so everyone knows there will be a chance to discuss them in the future. Doing this can help you meet the goals of your current meeting, but not lose track of important concerns that come up.

At your next meeting, you may want to refer to the conflict that happened and ask if anyone has any new reflections, thoughts, or reactions to what was said. This can help people release any unpleasant feelings or emotions they may still have from the conflict, and help the group "close the door" on bad feelings.



*There is a man who would come to our meetings and tell us how to be good wives. Listening to him made me very angry, but instead of sharing my feelings, I asked the women to share what they thought makes a good marriage. He has become a much better listener and supporter.*

## Work to help all participants feel powerful

Working for social change often means bringing people together, some of whom have greater privilege or status than others. A group may confront many of the problems they are trying to change in the world in their interactions with each other. When working with mixed groups, for example, with men and women, or with younger people and adults, those men or adults who traditionally have more decision-making power may talk more without even realizing it. People can feel intimidated or shy to talk when they feel they are younger, less educated, and less powerful.

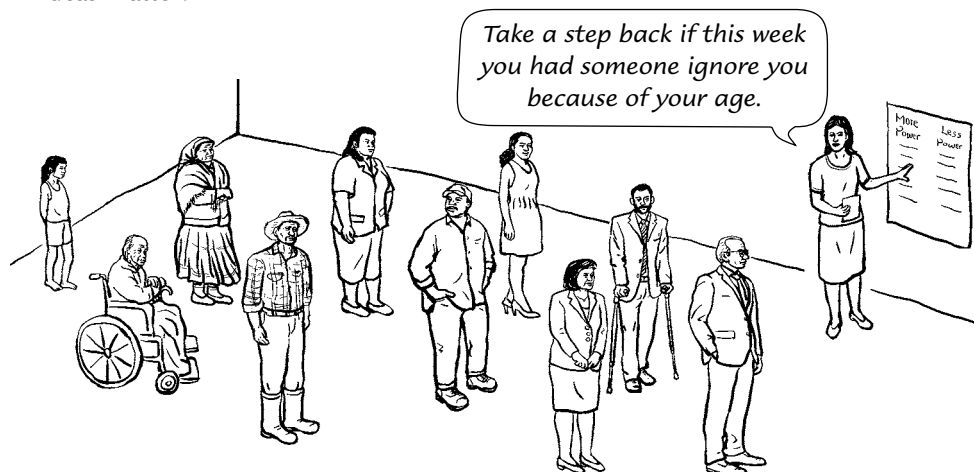
One way to address this problem is to break into smaller groups, for example, adolescents in one and older adults in another, to discuss separately, and then bring the whole group together to share the ideas from these separate discussions. One person can summarize the discussion and relay the decisions for each group.



*When I lead a training session with youth, I think it is important to talk about the power that I have as an adult, and as someone who has finished high school. We reflect on how people's power and privilege as individuals and as groups influence our group process and work.*

To build a stronger group that can work well together, it can also help for the participants to gain a better understanding of how there are different levels of power and privilege within the group. The activities Power shuffle (page 156) and Image theater (page 63) are ways to help a group think about and discuss power dynamics. Discussion questions can help people reflect on differences in power in the group, and how this might influence each person's experiences and their comfort with participation. For example, you might ask:

- What are the differences within our group in terms of age, gender, skin color, and access to resources such as education, money, and power?
- How might these differences affect our discussions and work together?
- What can we do to ensure that everyone has a voice, and to affirm that each person's ideas matter?



Activities such as the Power shuffle (page 156) may help people visualize power differences.

By using facilitation methods that encourage everyone's meaningful participation, the meeting leader can help a group overcome differences among participants and make good decisions.