

# Getting Clarity and Structure by Making Meetings Magic

Help your group get some clarity and structure by holding great activist meetings

## Why do we need to make meetings magic

Meetings are a big part of working collectively but too often... they suck. Life's too short and the stakes are too high to spend time in boring and unproductive meetings.

Here are some simple tips for getting the most out of meetings, relevant to collectives, committees and action groups.

1. **Have a clear purpose.** Why are you holding the meeting? Why is it needed and what do you intend to get out of it? Make sure the purpose is clear to participants. If you can't figure out the purpose don't have a meeting!
2. **Set an agenda.** Have a clear process for setting the agenda whether in advance or on the day. The purpose of each item should be clear, such as discussion, decision, or a notice for information. Proposal led decision-making could involve people putting something on the agenda with a pre-prepared motion for the group to discuss and decide upon. This means people have notice of what's expected prior to the meeting and can think about it and ask questions.
3. **Include an agenda review.** Talk through the agenda at the beginning of the meeting. Ensure items are in a logical order, allocate times to each item, trim the agenda and defer less pressing discussions if needed. Less is more – avoid overloading your meetings to allow more space for quality discussion.
4. **Make the agenda visible to everyone.** The agenda could be written on the whiteboard during the agenda review, or paper copies handed out. Making the agenda visible, especially with approximate times attached, means everyone has a sense of how long to spend discussing items, and the implications if they go too long. This means the chair carries less of the burden of time management and it is shared more in the group.
5. **Summarise actions.** At the end of each agenda item check for actions and what needs to be recorded. This is helpful for the minutes-taker, means things don't get

missed, and underlines actions for those who are going to carry them out. At the end of the meeting I suggest an actions check-list where each person says what their actions are coming out of the meeting and the minutes-taker can remind people of any that were missed. Saying tasks out loud can deepen commitment to the group to follow through.

6. **Record actions.** Keep an ongoing action list for the group. Individuals should also record their own actions in diaries, phone calendars, to do lists etc. This can make it more likely that people will carry out their actions, rather than relying on people to read the minutes (which some people only do right before the meeting if ever!)
7. **Roles.** Most meetings have a meeting chair or facilitator and someone to take minutes. Some groups also have the role of timekeeper and 'vibes-watcher'. The vibes-watcher keeps an eye on energy and mood on the group, can share observations and suggest different approaches eg 'People look tired, perhaps we need an energiser or a quick break?'
8. **Evaluate.** At the end of the meeting do a quick check of what worked and what to change about the meeting. This allows people to name difficulties and for you to learn as a group how to make the meetings go better.
9. **Build the group.** Meetings aren't just about ticking off tasks; they're about the relationships between the people in the group. Some ways you can foster the sense of the group and focus people include:
  - Start with an opening round where participants can share what's new in their lives (not just in relation to the organisation) or a check-in (how they are feeling, any issues impacting on participation). One fun and cheesy way to check-in is to use a metaphor for how you are eg 'If I was a plate of food I'd be...' (or a piece of music, landscape, etc)
  - Personalise the space, making a home for your group. This is especially important if you meet somewhere that's not your own space. It could be as simple as a table-cloth or a poster on the wall.
  - Put up your vision, mission, values, campaign goals or group agreements in the space. Remind people of why they work together, what they share in terms of commitment to the group and its vision.
  - Share food. It's a universal human way of relating! Plus a few snacks maintain energy.

*Source: Holly Hammond, Plan to Win <http://plantowin.net.au/2013/01/better-activist-meetings/>*

## Agenda Template

Time, Date, Length of meeting:  
Facilitator:  
Minutes:  
Participants:

Time	Agenda	Outcome	Who

## Explanation

**Time:** Estimate how long the item will take.

**Item:** Title for the focus of the session. In this column you could include if there is preparation for the meeting eg reading a document.

**Outcome:** Note the purpose of the session or hoped for outcome eg Update/Info Sharing; Discussion; Planning; Decision-making.

**Who:** Note if someone will take the lead on the item, present etc.

## Tips for getting your agenda to work well:

- Allow time for introductions and check-ins at the beginning of the meeting.
- Make time to review the agenda together. Check that everyone can stay for the whole meeting, or if not make sure items they need to be present for are moved if necessary. Agree on the finish time for the meeting and remind people of group agreements (eg listening to each other, being respectful, step up and step back, etc)
- Early on, have a few straightforward items that help the group warm up and feel effective together, like reviewing past actions and giving quick updates
- If there is an important item don't leave it to the end of the agenda but don't make it first thing either. Allow for the group to settle in (including any latecomers), knock off some easy items and then deal with the biggest item, putting after that any that don't need as much time or are less of a priority.

- For decision-making items: Present the issues; ask clarification questions; formulate proposals (potentially before the meeting); test for support; make decisions; allocate tasks.
- At the end of the meeting summarise actions (it can help for buy-in to have each person state the actions they commit to); do a quick evaluation of the meeting (what worked, what to change?) and plan for the next meeting. Don't forget to appreciate the facilitator, minute taker and participants!

Source: Holly Hammond, Plan to Win for GetUp

### Minutes Template

Time, Date, Length of meeting (planned and actual):

Facilitator:

Minutes:

Participants:

Apologies:

Item	Discussion	Decision	Tasks

Next meeting:

Items to add to next meeting agenda:

### Explanation

**Discussion:** keep the notes on this brief bullet points and just the main points that will update someone who missed the meeting, or jog the memories of those who

were there. During the meeting people can ask for something to be minuted – for example if they have a strong opinion about something the group is going to go ahead with.

**Decision:** Capture concisely any decisions the group makes. The wording may come from proposals that are adopted.

**Tasks:** Any actions coming out of the meeting, including who will do what by when. Next meeting the group can review the task list to keep people accountable.

*Source: Holly Hammond, Plan to Win for GetUp*