

Meeting Facilitation and Group Decision Making

“Well run, effective meetings require solid preparation. Too many organizers underestimate the time needed to plan and organize a good meeting. The hardest part, and certainly the most time-consuming aspect of a meeting, is the planning.”

Kim Bobo²²

The process of starting a community garden entails a number of steps (See Appendix C for resources on starting community gardens). The following is a discussion of group processes such as meetings and decision making that groups will engage in to undertake those tasks.

Meetings

Meetings can make or break a garden project. Well-planned, focused, effectively facilitated meetings will strengthen your garden project. This is crucial because so much time in any organizing project is spent in meetings where groups must make decisions together. Running an effective meeting is not something we pick up by osmosis or that we can do because of good social skills. We can learn the elements that lead to successful meetings by practicing our skills during every meeting we participate in.

Elements of a Well-Planned Meeting

➔ Set clear goals for the meeting.

It is important to have clear meeting goals in mind. Without them it is difficult to figure out an agenda and hard to know who should attend. Every meeting should have concrete, realistic and measurable goals the garden organizers want to accomplish. Avoid goals such as: “to have a meeting” — a meeting is not a goal in itself; or, “to educate people” — it is tough to measure whether people need to be “educated” about the opportunity at hand. Because meetings are used to plan action, make decisions, build the group, the initial meeting goals may be such things as:

- To decide on the garden’s purpose and design to achieve it.
- To develop a garden plan and timeline for implementation.
- To recruit new members.
- To evaluate goals or plans.

➔ Be selective about choosing a meeting site.

The meeting location will affect who comes to the meeting. Criteria for choosing a site include:

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The Meeting Facilitation & Group Decision-Making Workshop begins on page 136.

- **Familiarity** - Is it a place where people feel comfortable?
- **Accessibility** - Is the meeting site easy to get to? Is it accessible for people who are disabled or elderly?
- **Represents Constituency** - Is the site perceived as representative of those who may participate? For example, if the goal is to build a multi-racial community garden and meetings are being held in a church exclusively used by a white congregation, the choice of site would not represent the full constituency.
- **Adequate Facilities** - Different meetings require different facilities. Small meetings need a small, cozy room, while larger meetings need larger rooms with more elaborate facilities such as a microphone and sound system. Any group may require an overhead projector, slide projector, flip chart or blackboard.

➔ **Don't forget about childcare or other supports.**

In order for some people to attend meetings, childcare may need to be arranged at the site. A meeting with many families attending may need a separate room for childcare. Childcare can be an important way to embrace a diverse community. Looking for easy access from public transport for those who travel on it; easy entrance for those with disabilities or language translation if it seems appropriate.

➔ **Choose a convenient time.**

Set the meeting at a time that is most convenient for those who are invited to attend. An organizer may need to call several people and ask for possible suggestions.

➔ **Schedule meetings regularly.**

People are more likely to attend meetings that are held at the same time and place each week or month. Regularly scheduled meetings keep the group from having to negotiate a time and place for every meeting time — a big time and frustration saver.

It is important to hold regularly scheduled meetings at which everyone's concerns can be addressed and important decisions can be openly discussed and decided upon. However, unless they are well organized, regular meetings can be a frustrating and alienating experience that attract fewer and fewer people over time.

➔ **Set up the room before hand.**

Before the meeting, assess the room that will be used. Consider the following:

- **Seating arrangements** – See page 316 for examples.
- **Places to hang flip chart paper** – Will tape damage the walls?
- **Outlets** for audio-visual equipment – Do you need extra extension cords?
- **Refreshments** – Do you need to bring a coffee maker? Can people get to the food easily without disrupting the meeting? Who will pay for the food? Who will clean it up?



- **Comfort** – Does the heat or air conditioner need to be turned on ahead of time? Is the bathroom unlocked and does it have toilet paper?
- **Welcome** and sign-in table – A person welcoming newcomers creates a warm atmosphere. The welcomer can also give them a name tag and get them to sign in with their contact information which will be needed for future contacts. Where is the best place to set this up? If it is not possible to have a sign-up table, a sign-in sheet can be passed around during the meeting (although this can also be distracting).

➔ **Actively recruit members.**

How does the original group get people to a meeting? If it is a regular meeting, a phone call reminder can be enough. This can be done by a core member or through a phone tree. The reminder should include time, location, and main agenda items. If people want a particular new person to come, then a personal invitation may do the trick. Ask current members to invite others.²³

For public meetings, meeting information needs to be distributed to a large number of people. With the help of several community members, a simple flyer and/or newspaper or radio announcement can be made to announce the garden meeting. **Always include the date, time, location, purpose and contact name and number.** Translate the flyer into commonly spoken languages, so that everyone will be notified of the opportunity. Knock on doors or leave flyers at neighbor's front doors.

✳ Personally invite as many people as possible to attend the first meeting. A personal invitation goes a long way, especially for people who are shy or unfamiliar with community involvement.

Hang flyers around the neighborhood in cafes, laundromats, community centers, plant nurseries, senior centers, churches, schools and at the garden location if there is one. Go where the people you want at the meeting can be found, especially those who are under-represented such as seniors, people with disabilities, youth, low-income residents and minority groups.

Asking people to bring items or to help arrange things for the meeting helps assure their attendance. Assign people to bring coffee, cups, cookies, tablecloths, agendas, posters, sign-in sheet, or flowers. Ask other people to set up chairs, flip chart and food. Delegating tasks ahead of time may seem more trouble than it's worth, but it gets people involved in the meeting and the group. It also helps things run smoothly, which people appreciate.

➔ **Recruit members using the Four “W”s and an “R”**

The authors of *Digging Deeper*,²⁴ who have organized community gardens for over 20 years, recommend the following for recruiting folks with diverse attributes to create a strong garden project team. Seek out people with one of the **Four W’s – Work, Wisdom, Weight and Wealth**. One more category to be aware of is **Representation**.

- **Work.** It is essential to have people who will roll up their sleeves and take on the major tasks and responsibilities of the project.
- **Wisdom.** People with wisdom and experience are always important to have on board, especially in the early stages.
- **Weight.** Contact those who have influence in the community — a political sort, a prominent business person, or a longtime resident or elder.
- **Wealth.** Wealthy members can donate to the project, and often have a network of friends and associates from whom you can solicit contributions.
- **Representation.** Invite people from all parts of a community. If the garden is to be welcoming to all members of the community, then make sure they are invited to attend as key organizers from the beginning. Ask people of different ages, ethnicity, genders, religious background, sexual orientations, and classes that make up the community. The hard work of seeking out people who are different from each other but who live in the same neighborhood, developing relationships among them, and involving them in the garden organizing process will be instrumental in achieving long term project success and sustainability.

Once the garden is developed, the garden will be its own best advocate for recruiting participants. Some ways to promote this include: hand crafted gates with the garden’s name on it, whimsically designed fences painted with garden poetry, a large entryway bed of perennial flowers, and the overall viewscape. A billboard or information kiosk can hold flyers that display contact information for new people, plot and garden guidelines, announcements for the next garden meeting, upcoming festivals, donations lists or contests.

Meeting Roles

A successful meeting leaves people with a feeling that progress was made, time was wisely used, and people had fun. Everyone needs to feel they that their voice was heard and that they played a valuable role in shaping the meeting outcome. A meeting design that enables this type of participation can transform a person into an actor – one who actively helps build the future, rather than just waiting for it to happen – and a group into a team.



Clearly defined roles filled by capable people are essential parts of any successful meeting. Five key roles needed in a meeting are: facilitator, scribe, timekeeper, note-taker, and greeter (in public meetings).

➔ **The Meeting Facilitator keeps the meeting on track.**

The meeting facilitator is responsible for setting the tone of the meeting. It is her or his job to make sure that everyone feels safe, understands what is going on, is heard and stays involved. The facilitator is responsible for developing the meeting agenda and keeping the meeting topically on track and on time. Modeling the behavior that the facilitator expects from the participants is essential — speak briefly and to the point, use humor and eye contact, remain attentive, listen to each contribution with the intent of understanding, respond with a respectfulness that says each person's ideas are worth hearing, and, lastly, disagree with ideas, not people.

One of the most challenging tasks of the facilitator is to bring about decisions in a fair and equitable way. To aid in this, a facilitator can quickly review the roles, guidelines and goals at the beginning of each meeting in order to avoid unnecessary confusion during discussions. Such review would include the group's decision making process (e.g., consensus, majority, a combination), the responsibility of the facilitator to keep the meeting on track by calling people to order (e.g., stop side talking), asking to stay on topic or not repeat ideas already mentioned, and the group's previously agreed to guidelines for discussion.

Standard guidelines for discussion that the facilitator can introduce or can brainstorm with the group to create may include: Listen to others; Don't interrupt; Ask clarifying questions; Welcome new ideas; Start on time; Disagree with ideas not people; Treat every contribution as valuable; Respect the facilitator's decisions.

The workshop, Meeting Facilitation and Group Decision Making, beginning on page 136 suggests fun and fair ways for a group to create discussion guidelines and structures.

➔ **Scribes capture the essence of what is being said.**

The scribe is responsible for writing ideas on a flip chart so that everyone can keep track of what has been said.

➔ **The Notetaker records the details.**

The note-taker is responsible for taking detailed notes of what transpired at the meeting and preparing minutes for distribution to all participants.

➔ **The Timekeeper paces the discussion.**

The timekeeper is responsible for letting the group know when a discussion time is almost over, by giving a five minute warning, and for letting them know when time is up.

➔ **Greeters get the names of all attendees.**

The greeter welcomes new people and records names and contact information as they enter.

The following are solution ideas on common issues that can get in the way of a good meeting:

1. When a point is being discussed too long:
 - Summarize.
 - Suggest tabling the question for a later time.
2. When two members get into a heated discussion:
 - Summarize points made by each person and turn the discussion back to the group.
 - Invite the two to stay after the meeting so the three of you can talk it over.
3. When coping with a “one-person” show:
 - Interrupt with a statement giving the speaker credit for his or her contribution, but politely asking him or her to hold any other points until later.
 - Interrupt with “you have brought up many points that will keep us busy for a long time. Would anyone like to take up one of these points?”
4. When a speaker drifts from the subject:
 - Interrupt, give credit for the idea but explain that it is a departure from the main point.
 - Present to the group the question of whether it wants to stray from the outline or follow it.
 - Bring the discussion back to the topic by using the related idea as the transition.
5. When a member has difficulty in expressing him/herself:
 - Build up his/her confidence by stating appreciation for what has been said and then re-phrase the material with a preface such as “Is this what you mean, Mr. Jones?”

Another useful tool for keeping a meeting on track is to use a “parking lot” or “bike rack” system. When an issue is brought up during a meeting that is important to discuss, but not currently relevant to the issue at hand, the facilitator can ask that it be ‘bike racked’. The idea is then written on a flip chart with other bike rack items and revisited at the end of the meeting, to discuss if there is time, or to determine when it will be discussed in the future.



For more detailed information on troubleshooting during a meeting, refer to the handout, *Techniques for Dealing with Disruptive Dynamics* (found on page 155), in the Meeting Facilitation and Decision Making workshop found on 155.

There is no such thing as a “perfect” meeting. Having a clear purpose, being organized, offering strong facilitation and being flexible to changing situations are important strategies for creating good meetings to which people will return. However, not everything always goes smoothly. The most common issue, after lack of preparation, is people who act in ways that disrupt the meeting. Knowing how to handle those actions can help to keep a meeting running smoothly. Again, the most important strategy for avoiding difficult meeting situations is adequate preparation of the agenda, the facilitator, and the participants. The more everyone understands what the process and purpose of the meeting is, the more smoothly things will proceed.



Chapter 4, *Passing on the Learning: How to Facilitate Successful Workshops*, beginning on page 298 contains additional useful information on facilitation.



Tips for Effective Facilitation²⁵

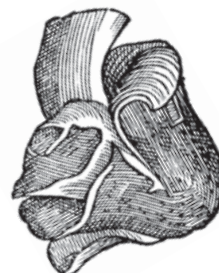
The following is a list of helpful tips to keep in mind while facilitating a meeting.

- Consider seating arrangement (circle of chairs, tables to work at, etc.)
- Welcome people
- Go over the agenda – Ask for changes and time limits
- Do substantial introductions (appropriate to group size)
- Define your role as facilitator
- Explain the Guidelines for Discussion
- Explain the decision-making process
- Invite participation (ask for it before the session begins)
- Make eye contact
- Use first names
- Use humor
- Use various facilitative tools and methods (see next section)
- Trust the wisdom of each participant
- Change your position/ move around the room
- Use visuals
- Record people's responses on a flip chart
- Avoid responding to each comment
- Give time for people to answer
- Don't lecture
- Give positive feedback
- Respect differences of opinion
- Empower people to speak and express themselves
- Seek commitments from people
- End session with overview and follow-up coordination
- Use evaluations
- Thank people for their work
- Pass out material after discussions



The following is a list of strategies that can be employed by facilitators in order to assist with moving a topic forward:

- **Introductions/ re-introductions:** Go around the room and give each person 30 seconds to summarize their feelings on a subject.
- **Icebreakers:** *Chapter 4: Passing on the Learning* includes a list of icebreakers that can help energize and refocus the group.
- **Brainstorming:** Invite participants to call out their responses to a question or topic. There is no discussion on anyone's ideas - all ideas are accepted and recorded on a flip chart. After a period of brainstorming, the group discusses individual points in more detail.
- **Small group discussions:** Break the large group into smaller groups of 4-8 to give all participants an opportunity to get to know one another, share their ideas and opinions, and work on an activity.
- **Paired work:** Divide the group into pairs of two to allow for a more intimate and non-threatening discussion.
- **Work alone/Journalling:** Give participants an opportunity for silent time to think about a subject before the whole group discusses it.
- **Report backs:** After breaking the group down into smaller groups, invite them to summarize what they discussed in the large group.
- **Role-plays:** Solicit volunteers to act out the topic at hand.
- **Fish bowl:** Used to flesh out a complex or difficult issue. Ask two people who have very different points of view to discuss it while others listen. After the key points have been made, then ask others to join in.
- **Popcorn:** Typical type of discussion in which any one in the group can raise his or her hand and be called on to speak.
- **Stacking:** During discussions when several people have their hands raised, call on one person and list the names of the others in line to speak. This allows people who wish to speak to relax and listen to the speakers in line before them, knowing they will be called on in turn.
- **Time outs:** If discussion gets too heated, then a break can be called to let things cool down.
- **Evaluations:** Ask the group for ideas on what can be done to move the topic forward.



A Standard Agenda

An agenda is a tool to keep everyone on the same page and to get everyone's issues addressed in a fair and effective way. It is a way to bring together different items in an organized manner that is manageable. It is important to provide the opportunity for everyone to add to and adjust the agenda before and at the beginning of a meeting. In regular meetings, a simple standard agenda such as the following can be used:

1. **Check-in** – Each person can share *briefly* about how they are feeling that day.
2. **Schedule and Announcements** – Short announcements that have to do with upcoming events. If an announcement turns into a discussion, it can be put on the agenda or on the “bike rack”.
3. **Appreciations** – (Optional) Opportunity to give short acknowledgements to the hard work others are doing.
4. **Agenda Review** – Meeting members can add new items to the agenda here. This is the place to prioritize and give time limits to agenda items, if needed.
5. **Agenda** – First discuss “tabled” items which are items from the last meeting that you did not get to or for some reason chose to put off to this meeting. Then discuss the new items from this week. You may want to put up time limits to discuss each item. If you cannot get through an item in the allotted time, the group can decide to take time from another item or can table the topic to continue the discussion next meeting.
6. **Next steps** – At the end of the meeting, each person says what they think their next task or responsibility is. This works to clarify who is doing what by when.
7. **Evaluation** – Leave a few minutes to ask how the meeting went for everyone. Ask participants to share a word or phrase that describes what they have learned. Also ask if there is anything that could be improved.

Initially, the original garden group will plan the agenda. Later, a steering committee of volunteers from the whole group will plan the agenda. Whoever works on the agenda should post it on a large flip chart in the front of the meeting so that everyone can follow and understand the meeting contents.

(Refer to Appendix B [pages 335-339] for more detailed agendas for the first and second public meeting of a group wanting to start a community garden.)