

# How To Conduct An Effective Meeting

## Organizing Toolbox by Ed Rush

**O**ne of the most important lessons that we have learned as a movement is that an organized community invariably fares better than one which does not organize, when the health and safety of its residents are at stake. This is why developing an organizing campaign is so important. And one of the most critical pieces of an organizing campaign is the meeting. The value of planning and conducting a meeting to achieve maximum effectiveness can not be over emphasized. The success of your meetings will turn on how well your group can handle three basic tasks: Planning, Outreach, and Execution.

### Planning

**T**he first thing you have to do is to determine, hopefully with the organization's steering or executive committee or some other group of like minded folks, why you are having the meeting in the first place. The desired objective of the meeting will help to determine how you do your outreach, what you will put on the agenda, and perhaps even who will chair, or facilitate the meeting. Most meetings can serve three purposes: Information, Inspiration, and Decision Making.

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*People do not come to meetings unless they believe that they benefit from them.*

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The reason why the residents of your community should come to the meeting you are planning should be clearly

spelled out in any materials you prepare, and clearly stated in any outreach that you do. Do not call meetings just to have meetings. The people who will come out to your meetings usually get involved in other issues and actions as well, subsequently they are busy people. The exception to this rule of course is a group that has regularly scheduled meetings once a month or less frequently. In cases like these it may be important to hold the regularly scheduled meeting as a way of maintaining group identity and esprit de corps. But, even in these circumstances you can use the context of the regular meeting to build community support for your group by having members bring people who have not previously attended.

Once you are clear on what the objective of the meeting is, you can start to plan. Working back from the goal you have established for your meeting you can plan outreach. Several questions to ask yourself are:

- To achieve our goal(s) who do we need to have at this meeting?
- How do we reach these individuals?
- What is the best time that most of these people could attend our meeting?
- What location would be centrally located or most accessible to the majority of the people we want to attend the meeting?

Generally, you should have some idea of what the agenda will be so that you can use this information in your flyers or pitch to get people to come to the

meeting. But the agenda does not have to be complete. In fact you would probably not want the agenda to be complete until shortly before the meeting. This will give you the flexibility to add important issues that come up just prior to your meeting.

### Outreach

**O**nce you get into the rhythm of running an organizing campaign, you realize that every event, meeting, or hearing is a potential opportunity to do outreach for your next meeting. So in reality once you have started to form a group and started to move forward, planning does not necessarily come before outreach. Once you begin your organizing campaign you will forever be on the lookout for potential allies. So you will always be networking, informing people about your issue(s), and inviting people to your next meeting even before you know what the agenda of the next meeting will be.

### Execution

**W**hile you should not force people to work on committees or projects, people who feel that the group can get along fine whether they show up or not, are just as likely to not show up.

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*People stop coming to meetings if they are not active participants.*

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It is always tempting for people to stay home and watch the latest episode of E.R., rather than to trudge across town in

the rain to yet another meeting. Inertia is powerful competition. Don't underrate it.

*People stop coming to meetings where everyone who speaks is put on trial.*

It is important for the person acting as facilitator to set the tone. Quite often the issues we organize around have a devastating impact on the lives of the people in the community. People may view them as life or death decisions. Indeed, for a working class family that has invested years and their life savings into a home which they have just been informed sits on contaminated land, it is literally a life or death issue. When put in this context, it should come as no surprise that discussions can turn into debates, and debates can turn into fights, even among residents ostensibly on the same side.

So, it is wise to make sure your facilitator sets the tone of the discussion. For example, your facilitator might say something like, "We need to establish ground rules before we begin the discussion. There is nothing wrong with having a different opinion on an issue than someone else in the room, but we don't want to have any personal attacks." It is one thing to say I disagree with your point because X or Y. It is quite another to say, "You're an idiot, who has never done anything but brought our neighborhood down. Your idea is the dumbest thing I ever heard." Your facilitator might want to ask that the group adopts a no attack policy before moving into a discussion. Other policies worth adopting include showing respect for whomever is speaking by not holding side conversations during the meeting and letting the facilitator recognize who will speak, so that each person has the opportunity to make their point without being cut off.

Finally, the facilitator of your meeting should give the group an opportunity to add any other ground rules for discussion before moving forward. Once the ground rules are completed and adopted by the group you should write them on a large piece of paper, and post them on the wall. These policies don't need to be repeated every time if you have a small consistent group, but they should at least be covered the first few times you have a

discussion, until people get used to the process. In addition, anytime you have a large influx of new people attending a meeting where there is a planned discussion it would be wise to establish the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting.

We have all been to meetings at which there didn't seem to be any agenda. Consequently, the whole meeting is spent talking about one issue that is never resolved, or people bring up issues that take the group off on tangents so that many issues get explored, but none get resolved. In either case your group will soon be in trouble if you never accomplish anything in your meetings. This leads us to another rule.

*People stop coming to meetings where nothing gets done.*

Conversely, people will seek out the meetings of a group that develops a reputation for getting things done. So as you develop your agenda, try to include some action items that either a subgroup can be formed to deal with, or the larger group can vote on in the meeting. If there is an issue that needs to be discussed, and you believe the discussion cannot be concluded in the time you have allotted for your meeting, it might make sense to put that last on your agenda. You can instruct the facilitator to check with the group at the scheduled ending time, to ask if they want to continue to discuss the issue at hand, and for how long. If you have information or announcements to make in the meeting you should deal with them first, before issues to be discussed. Finally, make sure that before you end the meeting the action items have names and dates next to them. In other words, who will take the action, and when it will get done. Otherwise, it won't get done.

*People stop coming to meetings if the group doesn't keep its word.*

Before you announce that the group will take an action of some kind, be pretty certain that your group has the people and the resources to follow through. The people in your group must

have the will to carry out the task at hand. There is an old saying that, "You should think five times before you speak. Because your word is your bond, and your bond is your life, and you should surrender your life before you go back on your word." Think of any announcement about what your group will do as the bond of your group, and for the group to go back on its word without a good reason is to jeopardize the life of the organization.

Additionally, people who have not really committed to your group but who come to meetings occasionally (when E.R. is in reruns) will invariably interpret a committee or individual commitment to complete a task and report back at the next meeting as a commitment of the entire group. These folks are particularly susceptible to the person who sits in the back of the room and says to anyone who will listen that, "they never get anything done at these meetings." That is why it is imperative to have someone record what commitments were made at each meeting and to follow up with people in between meetings to make sure these things get done. When it becomes more work to prod people to complete their assignments than to do them yourself, it is tempting to just go ahead and do them. Don't. If you do work that other people committed to do, *you* will end up doing it, *all the time*. ❖

*Remember, you are not just trying to accomplish tasks for a specific meeting. You are working to build an organization.*

