

CHAIRING MEETINGS

There are lots of things to discuss at your group executive committee meetings so it's very important to clearly define the difference between matters discussed by leaders at the group scouters meeting and matters discussed by the group executive committee.

Whether the cubs should have orange or lemon squash at the cub fun day is really a matter for leaders, whereas whether there is enough cash in the budget for refreshments is a decision for the executive committee. The ability of the group chairperson to chair the meeting effectively is key. Effective meetings have a good chair!

What makes a good chairperson?

A good chairperson helps the meeting to run smoothly and efficiently. They will make sure that:

- all the business is discussed in a timely matter
- everyone's views are heard
- clear decisions are reached
- the meeting starts and finishes on time

A good chair will also:

- always be thinking about the meeting overall, not just the topic under discussion (this can make it more difficult for you to participate in the discussions)
- always aim to draw a balance between hearing everyone's views and getting through the business in hand
- never use their position as chair as an opportunity to put forward their views to the exclusion of others, or to dominate the meeting

No one can do this without the cooperation and agreement of the whole meeting - the chairperson is not a miracle worker!

Everyone can learn how to chair meetings well; it just takes a bit of thought and practice. You will get more confident with experience. Try watching how other people chair meetings and seeing what works and what doesn't.

Before the meeting

To chair a meeting well, you need to think about the meeting before you arrive at it.

Ask yourself the following questions in advance of the meeting:

- Why are you having the meeting?
- What end results do you want from it?
- What will you discuss at it?
- Do you want guest speakers?
- Do you need to get more information to inform the discussion?
- Do you want to ask someone to prepare an introduction?
- Do you want to distribute any information in advance of the meeting?

It isn't the chair's job to figure all this out on their own. Work together with your group scout leader, secretary and other committee members. Find out what people want to discuss, and think about how you can raise issues in a clear and informed way.

The Agenda

An agenda is simply a list of the things you want to discuss in your meeting. As well as helping you plan, it is a useful way of making sure you cover everything you need to at the meeting. A clear agenda, with timings, really helps when you are chairing.

The group scout leader and group chair should prepare the agenda in consultation. When preparing the agenda, the previous minutes should be consulted for items to be followed up under the agenda point 'Matters arising from the last minutes'. Major discussion points should have their own place on the agenda. See our factsheet called '[How to create an effective agenda](#)' for more information on agenda planning.

At the start of the meeting

It's important to start the meeting on time. People volunteer their time and it is important not to waste it. You will find that people are more likely to volunteer if they know that all meetings are finished in two hours or under.

You want everyone at the meeting to feel comfortable about speaking and putting their point of view. For a meeting to work well, everyone needs to feel welcome, included and informed.

Here are a few tips:

- Organise someone to welcome people as they arrive. Never let a new person sit ignored while everyone else chats
- Make sure everyone has the agenda and any papers - put them on the chairs or on the table or give them to people at the door
- Introduce yourself and other speakers at the start of the meeting
- If it is a small meeting, ask everyone to introduce themselves. Sometimes it works well to get people to say a bit more about themselves as part of the introductions
- Tell people what the meeting is about. Don't assume everyone knows as much as you do

How will your meeting be run?

Every chair needs some guidelines about how the group wants their meetings to be run. It helps to set out some simple rules - these must be ones everyone accepts and is prepared to work with, or they'll be useless.

Once you've got some rules agreed, it is much easier to chair the meeting, and people are less likely to take it personally when you ask them not to interrupt or stop them from wandering off the topic. You need to work out the rules that suit your group, but here are some that are commonly used:

- Ask people to speak 'through the chair'. (This means putting your hand up if you want to speak and waiting for the chair to say it's your turn)
- Don't interrupt other people
- Stick to the agenda item currently under discussion
- Don't talk amongst yourselves
- Respect other people's views - don't groan or pull faces when someone else is speaking. Wait until they've finished and then put your point of view calmly and politely
- Keep contributions short and to the point
- Start and finish the meeting on time

Remember....

- You will need to remind people of the meeting rules at each meeting. There may be new people there, and even regular attendees will forget
- A group can take a while to get used to the meeting rules you've agreed. If it doesn't work perfectly first time, keep on trying

Chairing the meeting

The key tasks of the Chair during the meeting are:

1. Getting through the business on time
2. Involving everyone
3. Reaching decisions
4. Dealing with difficult people or discussions

Getting through the business

It's very frustrating for everyone if a meeting doesn't deal with the business it needs to, or if it drags on for hours. People leave feeling demoralized and irritated - and quite possibly won't come back.

Here are a few tips:

- Have a clear agenda with rough timings
- Briefly introduce each agenda item (or get someone else to).
- Never assume people know what you're talking about. Take time to go over the issues and explain why you are discussing them
- Always keep an eye on the time and move items on if necessary. Make sure you've got a watch or can see a clock
- Stick to the agenda item under discussion. If people try to raise other issues, acknowledge them, but don't get drawn in, e.g. "That's an important point which we can come back to later..."
- Stop private conversations and asides as soon as they start.
- Tell the meeting what decisions you are making and why – e.g. 'I'm going to give this discussion another 5 minutes and then draw it to a close'

Remember:

- Don't use your position as an opportunity to impose your views. You are there to facilitate the meeting, not dominate it
- Keep an overview - remember your role as chair
- Listen to other people
- Make sure all viewpoints get heard - including those you disagree with
- Don't be under-assertive. You've been given a role, and people will be looking to you. Don't be afraid of speaking out

Involving everyone

Have you ever been at a meeting where no one spoke out against a particular proposal, but you discover afterwards that lots of people didn't agree with it? This happens far too often and means there will only be half-hearted support for the group's decisions.

You want to hear everyone's views, and make sure everyone is included and involved in the meeting.

There are two sides to this:

- Restraining those who are over keen on the sound of their own voice
- Encouraging those who are quiet, nervous, or new to the meetings
- Ideally, you want an atmosphere where there can be genuine debate and discussion. People should be able to disagree with each other and listen to different opinions in a way that is constructive and moves everyone on

This takes time to develop, and requires the involvement of the whole group, but there are things the chair can do to help:-

Some tips on involving people:

- If lots of people want to speak, keep a list of whose turn it is to speak next to remind you
- Make sure people know you have noticed that they want to speak
- Stop people from talking for too long. Be firm and consistent but not aggressive. If someone is going on endlessly, interrupt them and say something like "thank you for your

contribution, you've raised some interesting points. I'm going to stop you there for the moment so other people can comment on this issue"

- Give preference to people who haven't spoken before. Say something like "I know you've got your hand up, John, but I'm going to take Mary first as she hasn't spoken yet"
- Give opportunities to everyone to put their point of view. Ask questions to draw people out, for instance "Does anyone else have any thoughts on this issue?" or "Is there anyone who hasn't spoken yet who would like to say something?"
- Try going around everyone in turn to get their views on a topic - this only works in smaller committee meetings
- Stop people from interrupting. Step in immediately with, "Hold on, let x finish what they have to say". Make sure you don't forget to come back to the person who interrupted when it's their turn
- Make sure you don't ignore people who have their hands up in favour of those who are interrupting
- Listen carefully to what people are saying, and make sure their suggestions are considered by the meeting
- Make sure people expressing unpopular or minority views get heard properly and aren't intimidated out of saying what they think

Reaching decisions

It's easy for discussions to wander around and then drift away without any decision or action agreed or discussions get bogged down, with no one taking responsibility for finding a way through.

As chair you need to keep an overview and help the meeting to reach decisions. Don't worry if you can't do this straight away - it's one of the most difficult bits of chairing, and it takes confidence and practice to do well.

A few tips for reaching decisions:

- Listen carefully to the discussion and jot down key points
- At the start of a discussion, remind people what the issue is, and what decisions need to be made
- See if you can pull together the points people are making and suggest a constructive way forward. For instance, you might begin 'It seems we agree that...'
- If there are two or three different points of view, try to summarise each one and present them clearly to the meeting
- Before you move on to the next item, go over what's been agreed. This is a way of checking you did all agree the same thing and helps the minute-taker to get a clear record
- Before you move on, check that you've decided who will do whatever it is you've agreed on. If you don't, either nothing will happen, or the person who always does everything will end up with yet another task
- Don't assume silence means agreement. Make sure people have been able to say what they think

Dealing with difficult people

As Chair you may sometimes have to deal with 'difficult' people - the non-stop talker, or the know-alls, or those with a bee in their bonnet. There are no easy answers, but the general way you conduct the meeting will make a difference.

Here are some tips for dealing with difficult people:

- Remember that most people at the meeting will be supporting your efforts
- Remind people of the meeting rules, and that everyone has agreed to these
- Be firm and consistent - don't allow difficult people to get away with things and then come down hard on people you find easier

- When two people get into a heated discussion, summarise the points made by each, then move the focus away from the individuals by asking what other people think about the issues
- When someone keeps repeating the same point, assure them that their point has been heard, and then turn the discussion back to the group
- If someone is continually criticising try to turn the question round to them, for instance “what suggestions do you have for how this could be improved?” or “what would you do in this situation?”
- On rare occasions you may have to deal with someone who is really disruptive in a meeting and won't listen to any of your helpful suggestions. If this happens, try asking the group for support – e.g. ‘do people want to spend more time on this discussion or move on to the next topic?’ This will make it clear to the person involved that everyone, not just the chairperson, wants to move on

How did the meeting go?

It is always useful to get feed-back on how the meeting went. One way of doing this is to ask people at the meeting what they thought of it. You can do this at the end of the meeting. Just go around everyone in turn, asking them how they thought it went. You will get some useful feedback, and it makes everyone feel involved. This tends to work best with a small group that meets regularly but can also be useful in other situations.

If it is a big group meeting, you might want to have comment or suggestion forms for people to fill out at the end of the meeting.

After the meeting

- Allow time after the meeting has finished to talk to new people or follow up suggestions and contributions people made
- Talk to your committee members about how the meeting went
- Ensure that the minutes and action points are distributed within one week of the meeting taking place.

By making sure that the minutes are circulated quickly after the meeting, with names against action points ensures that people will be able to carry out their agreed action before the next meeting. If you are only sending out the minutes with the next agenda, chances are that people may have forgotten that they agreed to do it, they will then send their apologies to the meeting rather than turning up and admitting that they had forgotten. That is a meeting wasted

- Start thinking about the next meeting!

Here's a great checklist for successful proactive meetings:

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| • Only meet if you really need to | • Control airtime. Hear from everybody |
| • Plan exactly what you want to achieve | • Beware of agenda hijackers. Stay focused |
| • Invite useful, interesting people | • Finish before people mentally leave |
| • Let people know why you're meeting | • Agree who does what when |
| • Make sure everyone knows each other | • Follow up individually. You'll learn stuff |

Be sensitive to the number of meetings people have to attend. Try to make sure all meetings you run are necessary, useful and worthwhile.

