Effective Coalition Meetings

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Effective meetings begin with a purpose and an agenda. The coalition facilitator is responsible for communicating the purpose to members and conducting the meeting according to plan. At the start of a meeting, the facilitator should go through the proposed agenda, briefly explain each item and its time limit, and ask for any questions.

The Meeting Agenda

A meeting agenda should include the following:

1. The date, time and place of the meeting
2. A statement of the main purpose of the meeting (whether it is a regular meeting or a special meeting)
3. Agenda items
   - Include who is responsible for presenting each item.
   - Include time allotted for each item.
4. The date and time of the next meeting
5. Any special upcoming meetings or events

The coalition facilitator should send the agenda to members prior to the meeting and ask whether anyone has items that they would like to add. The facilitator can ask that members who wish to add items to the agenda notify him/her at least two days prior to the meeting. The facilitator can also ask members to respond to the agenda notification, indicating whether they plan to attend the meeting.

Conducting Meetings

Coalition facilitators face a variety of challenges when it comes to leading effective meetings. Below is a list of potential difficulties identified by Butterfoss, along with tips for how to deal with them.

1. Starting and ending on time: The facilitator should be mindful of time, making every effort to stick to the agenda so that the coalition can start and end meetings on time. He/she should be realistic about the number of items included in the agenda and the time that is allocated to each item. It may be helpful to keep a written record of unfinished discussion items and discussion items that are off the agenda so that the coalition can stay on task and revisit those items later.

2. Difficulty making decisions: Leading the group through a decision-making process that consistently results in group consensus is a skill that is developed over time. Clear communication of goals and priorities can help speed up the decision-making process. The use of prioritizing tools, such as rating, can also help the group make difficult decisions.

3. Questioning decisions that have already been made: Involving all members in group discussions, including the quiet ones, can help to ensure that everyone has a say in decisions. It can also help ensure that all members understand what the group has decided and why.

4. Preferring to deal with small issues: The facilitator should allot time for topics based on their significance. Placing the most critical or time-consuming items at the top of the agenda will help encourage members to arrive on time and give key items their full attention.

5. Key persons not attending: When key members fail to attend meetings, the facilitator should try to find out why they are not attending. If members do not feel like meetings are worth attending, this sentiment can be improved by ensuring that real work is done at each meeting. If meetings are held primarily for announcements and information sharing, it may be more effective to send out email updates. If members are not attending because they are unable to make meetings, ask coalition members to list their preferred meeting times and experiment to find the best time for each group.

6. Follow-through on tasks is lacking: Action items should be assigned to members at each meeting, and meetings should be adjourned with a summary of action items and assignments, including deadlines. The facilitator or appropriate committee chair should follow up with each member prior to the next meeting to stimulate action and check on progress.
Meeting Notes

It is not always possible for every member to attend every meeting. Meeting notes help keep members informed about the work of the coalition, regardless of whether they are in attendance at each meeting.

Meeting notes typically contain the following:

- The date, time and place of the meeting
- A list of members and officers present
- The reports of officers, chairs and committee representatives
- Votes that are taken during a meeting
- Elections and nominations
- Important announcements

Conference Calls and Video Meetings

Conference calls and video meetings are increasingly utilized by coalitions as alternatives to face-to-face meetings. These meeting formats can save time and money, especially when coalition members live in rural communities and/or have to travel a significant distance to attend in-person meetings.

Conference calls and video meetings are like face-to-face meetings in that they follow meeting agendas and are led by meeting facilitators. The biggest difference in these meeting formats is the equipment that they require. To conduct a conference call or video meeting, the meeting facilitator will need to use a hosting service. A hosting service, found online, will provide the facilitator with a phone number and/or web address that members can use to join the meeting.

For conference calls, all members who wish to participate in the call need to have access to a telephone. It is best to use a phone with the speakerphone feature when participating in a conference call, as this is more comfortable than holding a phone up to one’s ear for the duration of a lengthy meeting.

For video meetings, each member will need to have access to a computer with an Internet connection and a webcam. Members will also need to have speakers and a microphone on their computer unless conference calling will be used for the audio portion of the meeting.

Conference call and video meeting etiquette is similar to general meeting etiquette in many ways, although there are a few extra things that members should do to ensure that they are clearly heard and understood by other on the call.

Tips for a Successful Conference Call or Video Meeting

- Identify yourself before speaking.
- Enunciate clearly.
- Speak more slowly than usual.
- Speak in a normal tone and at a normal volume.
- Wait for others to finish before speaking.
- Call in early so that the meeting can start on time.
- Stay on the line for the entire call, or let others know at the beginning that you will need to leave early.
- Be present. Pay attention and set aside other tasks during the meeting.
- Choose a quiet location with minimum background noise.
- Look into the monitor when speaking in a video meeting.
- Test all equipment before the start of the meeting.

Healthy Meeting Guidelines

Healthy meeting guidelines are often written by health-conscious organizations to create meeting environments that foster good health. Healthy meeting guidelines can help a coalition to lead by example, given that many coalitions are formed to improve the health of communities. Healthy meeting guidelines may include the following:

- Recommend healthful food items to serve at meetings and events.
- State that the coalition will not provide food at gatherings unless meetings are held during meal times.
- Suggest that stretch or activity breaks be incorporated into meetings that are over an hour in length.

Examples of healthy meeting guidelines and assistance in guideline writing may be available from local Extension offices, local health departments and other local nonprofit organizations. These organizations may also be able to provide technical assistance in setting up conference calls and video meetings, if needed.

References


**Additional Resources**

The Asset-Based Community Development Institute. "Downloadable Resources." Publications on community assessment and community mobilization. abcdinstitute.org/publications/downloadable

Coalitions Work. "Tools and Resources." Resources for a variety of coalition processes and coalition evaluation. coalitionswork.com/resources/tools

University of Kansas. "Community Tool Box." Toolkits on a variety of topics related to partnership building and community change. ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents


Iowa State University, North Central Regional Center for Rural Development. Vision to Action: Take Charge Too. Publication about community assessment, vision development, action planning and evaluation. soc.iastate.edu/extension/ncrcrd/ncrcrd-rfd182-print.pdf