

# PRINCIPLES of a good MEETING

a reader on Meeting Techniques

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In a really democratic structure, meetings are meant to

- motivate people
- exchange information
- agree to take action / divide tasks
- reach agreement on views and strategies
- facilitate a good follow-up of actions/tasks/agreements

They are NOT meant to

- give a lot of information (meetings just can't)
- have a meeting for the sake of the meeting
- show how important some people are
- manipulate people

**Remark:** We know that there is hardly any tradition in many parts of the world with the kind of structured meeting, described here. Or rather, in some parts there is the bad memory of a tradition of another type of structured meeting. However we have noticed a lot of frustrations with the actual ways of meeting within different groups and organizations in Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Ecuador, Georgia, East Germany, West Germany, Lithuania, Macedonia, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States. We believe that using the kind of tools described in this brochure, which are used all over the world within all kind of organizations for a long time, can make meetings more effective and motivating.

ZHABA is a collective of facilitators that cooperates with NGOs, to tackle barriers that hinder them in working for a change. ZHABA translates as FROG, Facilitators Reaching Out to Grassroots.

ZHABA is an affiliate of the



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## Useful Literature

**More information on  
facilitation, workshops, handsigns:**  
<http://www.zhaba.cz/materials/materials.html>

**A comparison of different meeting formats:**  
<http://www.zhaba.cz/workshop2.html>

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*Public Meetings*  
*How to run a meeting*

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## Introduction

Everything seemed so simple: It is somewhere in 1990 in Central and Eastern Europe, a lot of political changes have taken place, you still want to change more, do something for the environment, call a group together and start meeting regularly to achieve this goal. Now, more than 10 years later you and your group still meet. The group learned a lot about how to work and how to achieve success. So did others. In East and West, North and South. Still a lot of these groups are not completely satisfied. A lot of people left the group and very often the reason was somewhere in the meetings.

We have worked with groups in Albania, Bulgaria, China, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Ecuador, Georgia, East Germany, West Germany, Japan, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, United States and Yugoslavia and reached the same conclusions time and again. Conclusions on questions like:

- Why do people organise meetings?
- Why do people attend meetings?
- How can meetings be made more effective?

Some of this experience is summarized in this reader. It is not a manual, not a book of recipes. It is meant to help you facilitating your meetings better. To get ideas, improve them and implant them into your own routine.

Whenever you have suggestions to improve this reader, they are very welcome. We publish on the Internet and only print a small quantity of paper copies. Therefore, your remarks can be included very quickly in a next issue.

This reader is meant both for people who will participate in a meeting, as well as people who organise a meeting. As you will find out, we think that not only the organiser or the president of a meeting is responsible for it's success, but also all of the participants. When participants don't know much about the processes involved they can be very annoying. However, when they *do* know, their interference in the method and the process of a meeting in order to improve it, can, in our experience, be extremely valuable.



## Reasons for organizing a meeting

Different reasons for meetings also cause different characters of a meeting. Some examples:

- **The meeting can be part of a long-term strategy.**

*Example:* a monthly meeting about the progress of activities of organization X.

In this case it will probably be part of a structural series of meetings in a certain frequency. During this meeting there will be a lot of routine (e.g. a fixed agenda, fixed roles, fixed methods).

Important keywords will be: continuity, coordination, information exchange, division of tasks, follow-up.

- **The meeting can be part of a short-term strategy.**

*Example:* a meeting to set up an action against a firm that dumped hazardous waste in a mountain area nature reserve.

This meeting will be an incidental one (maybe a short series of two to five meetings) and will have a very specific goal.

Important keywords will be: information exchange, new ideas, division of tasks, follow-up.

- **The meeting can be the start of a new track or concept that can be of a great importance in future.**

*Example:* Someone within your group wants to start a campaign on a new issue: genetically engineered food. Your group has to figure out, whether they want to do that, what kind of arguments play a role what kind of activities that might bring, etcetera.

This meeting will have an orientation character. Meeting techniques like brainstorming, opinion rounds, straw polls or opinion polls can play an important role here.

Important keywords will be: information exchange, exchange of opinions, new ideas.

- **The meeting can be organized to start a first cooperation between different organizations.**

*Example:* Four groups want to start a common campaign against increasing health problems of drug users in a large town: a drug user group, a streetwork organisation, a Christian drug users support group and the local hygiene institute.

In this meeting it is very important to actual MEET, exchange, define options for common action and decide who will do what when. It will resemble a symposium, congress or conference. It could look a lot more formal than the more task oriented meetings types described above. It can also be in the form of an interactive workshop.

Important keywords here: getting to know one another, atmosphere, co-operation, competition, exchange of information and opinions, follow-up.

- **The evaluation meeting / success party.**

*Example:* After the International Women's Day activities a women's group wants to know what has happened exactly for the report to the main funders of the activities.

This will be a very informal meeting, but still one, where you want to have a clear result: the list with strong and weak points, where you can learn from and which you can use in future. On the other hand such a meeting must also be motivating for the members of your group to continue their engagement.



# 1. Background

## MOTIVATION

- As in any other activity, the key issue in meetings is also: the motivation of people to do something for, think about or believe in a better world. When people are continuously motivated, the rest follows from there.
- People like a good, motivating, positive atmosphere - and people like things to be DONE. They need to feel involved.
- In meetings, it is important that new people feel motivated to join your efforts. There is a lot to be done!
- Also, active people need to be motivated to continue being active. Meetings in particular cause a lot of people to quit an initiative. And mostly because of a negative, non-inspiring, non-motivating atmosphere.
- In a positive atmosphere there is room to share ideas and feelings.

## INFORMATION

- At meetings, you can give information to and receive information from other people.
- Exchange of information has to be short and clear.
- Sometimes it looks like we have too little information, but in fact there is too much information in the world. Therefore, we need to find the *necessary* information and use the ways to get it as effectively as possible. It also means, that it's good to keep the amount of information every person has to process at an absolute minimum!

There are also situations when information is withheld because someone thinks you don't or shouldn't need it. Or because you think someone else shouldn't need it... People can judge for themselves which information they need. However, you don't have to tell everything you know directly. Give the information that is required at that moment, and give people the opportunity to ask further. Background information can be given in written form.

## DECISIONS

Choosing a theme to be active on; choosing a strategy; working out activities; making arrangements and dividing tasks to do so; solving problems of the group; solving problems within the group. All these things require decisions. You might want to reach these decisions in a group, so you call for a meeting.

What is a decision?

- A local action group that says, "The government should do more about waste separation," does not take a decision.
- A decision tells what should happen, when, and who should do it. When you want to convince the government to do more about waste separation, you can take the decision: "Lucia will write a friendly letter to the government before next Friday, asking for a more active approach of waste separation."

Arguments are important, not whose argument it is. The decision is the important thing, not the ego.

## PROCESS

Meetings are always part of a larger something. Meetings for the sake of having a meeting are no use. Meetings can be part of a social network: meeting people, making social contacts. They can also be a part of a long-term strategy in a campaign, or to build coalitions, or just to get ideas about what to do with your spare time and money. Meetings are always part of a larger process. When organising a meeting, it is good to be aware of this larger process. It helps you defining:

- goals
- strategies
- target groups
- allies and opponents
- methods and meeting techniques
- follow up



## 2. The Basic Elements of a Meeting

### People

Wherever two or more people are gathered, there is a meeting. A meeting can consist of indeed two or three people, but also of 20, 200 or 2000. People are the basic element in each meeting. This sounds very logical, but most meetings do not seem to be based on that. They are dull, not everybody is involved, only a few people dominate, they don't motivate and not very much is actually done or decided.

- When organising a meeting you should be very aware of your target group: who is coming to the meeting? Answer questions like: What do these people expect? Can the people I want to see on the meeting actually come (time, place)? Is it useful *for them* to come (apart from it being useful for you; remember you will have to compete with other useful things like television, the cinema, sleeping, family, work, school, etc.)? When your meeting is adapted to the participants, you will be able to get the most effect out of it.
- There are some qualitative differences between meetings of 2, 20 and 200 people.  
Meetings of less than 8 to 10 people can easily be informal and with little structure. Everybody can know and address everybody else in the group. It is relatively easy in these groups to reach high-set goals: changes in behaviour, changes in opinion, engagement in tasks.  
Meetings between 8 and 20 people are already somewhat different. Not everybody will know everybody else in a similar way; there will be a lot of different opinions; not everybody will be able to speak when you are meeting in a plenary (with everybody in one large group). This kind of meeting will need some structure. For informal parts, smaller subgroups (of less than 8, optimally 3 to 5 people) will be necessary. You will need a good facilitator for the plenaries, etcetera. Still you can reach relatively high goals with such a group, provided the structure of the meeting is very well prepared.  
Meetings between 20 and around 40 people should be even more structured. Most participants will be incognito (not knowing everybody else, not being known really themselves). The goals that can be achieved do not reach far beyond information exchange, formal decisions and social interaction.  
In meetings of over 40 people almost everybody will be incognito. This requires a strong structure and you should not expect too much from the outcome.

### STRUCTURE OF A MEETING

Every meeting should have some sort of structure in order to improve the atmosphere and to be effective. This does not mean that every meeting must be formal. You can also structure in an informal way. Structure helps to recognise what is important at that moment and what is superfluous. It avoids wasting time on unimportant things and therefore also improves the atmosphere.

Important parts of the structure of any meeting are:

#### ➤ **Atmosphere**

The meeting should be structured in a way that the atmosphere is motivating:

- breaks at points where people get tired;
- more relaxing points of discussion after heavy ones;
- comprehensible logic in the agenda.

#### ➤ **Problems/questions → information → opinions/attitudes/expectations → decision**

There is certain logic in how good decisions are taken. First the question or the problem needs to be clear. All necessary information needs to be available and should be shared. Then opinions, attitudes and expectations can be discussed, leading to concrete decisions. When this logic is recognisable in the structure of the meeting, the meeting will be more effective and pleasant.

#### ➤ **Timing**

Remember that people get tired after a period of discussion. Therefore, it is good to have important subjects at the start of the agenda, but not as first item either! People first have to feel comfortable enough to discuss these important subjects. At the end of the meeting there should only be minor points of discussion.

This very often goes wrong in a lot of meetings: it looks easier to deal with easy points first and to shift the important ones to the middle. This causes (especially in badly prepared and badly facilitated meetings) huge stress at the end of the meeting so that the actual decision sometimes is not taken at all. This is extremely de-motivating for the group.

Therefore, set a realistic but tight time-plan for the meeting.



### ➤ **The agenda**

The rough schedule for an agenda of a well-structured meeting could look like this (optional parts between [...]):

- opening;
- [short round of introduction of the participants];
- [appointment of facilitator, note-taker, possible vibes-person and timekeeper];
- remarks about the minutes of the last meeting;
- acceptance of the minutes of the last meeting;
- introduction of the agenda; acceptance of the agenda;
- a relatively simple point (announcements, a simple discussion);
- the main points of discussion (introduction; informative questions; discussion on the backgrounds; proposals for decisions and discussion; decisions);
- some less important or controversial points;
- repeating the agreements and decisions of the meeting;
- closure of the meeting.

Depending on the character of the meeting, the agenda can have several 'sub-meetings'. When there are one or more subjects that need to be discussed by one or more sub-groups of people in the meeting, these groups can have their own 'workshop' or 'brainstorm group'. In that case, the agenda of the meeting has several 'sub-agendas'.

## **SPECIAL ROLES**

During traditional meetings there are two or three roles: ordinary participants, a chairperson and usually a note-taker. Because the task of the chairperson in this setting is often too heavy, normal meetings very often encounter problems. To overcome these problems, it is possible to use more different roles:

### **. the facilitator** (other names are '*moderator*' or '*chairperson*')

Responsible for the technical process.

- introduce the point on the agenda;
  - . what is the subject?
  - . why should we talk about it?
  - . why should we talk about it now?
  - . what is the goal we want to reach when talking about it?
  - . in what way do we want to reach the goal?
  - . how much time do we have to reach it?
  - . (when needed) in what way do we decide on this subject?
- keeps the speakers list;
- give word to people and decide who is allowed to talk;
- introduce other discussion methods when necessary;
- motivate people to participate in the discussion;
- ask for proposals or suggest proposals;
- repeat decisions and agreements, so that they are clear to everybody.

### **. the note-taker**

Responsible for keeping track of the content of the discussions and decisions. Responsible for working out the minutes, the report of the meeting.

- do *not* write down what everybody says literally;
- do *not* write down *who* says *what* (this is not interesting for reaching decisions in a group);
- write down the important arguments in the discussion;
- write down exactly decisions, common opinions, differences of opinion;
- tell the group, where the discussion stopped and has to be continued after a break.

### **. time-keeper**

Responsible for keeping the time.

- warn the facilitator or the group when time runs short;
- tell the facilitator or the group regularly how much time is left for the subject.



**. vibes-person**

Responsible for the atmosphere of the meeting.

- interfere when the atmosphere is getting worse and suggest discussion-technical solutions to improve the situation. Think of situations like:
  - . tensions;
  - . people not listening to others;
  - . people repeating a lot what has been said;
  - . people not getting the chance to speak;
  - . people abusing power (voice-power, authority, etc.)

The vibes-person has the right to interfere in the discussion *at any time*. He or she does not have to wait on his or her turn, but the facilitator will allow the vibes-person to speak directly. The note-taker will have to take care that it is clear where the discussion can be started again after this intervention.

People with a special role normally don't take part in the content of the discussion. Only in that way can they concentrate on their role. Moreover, only in that way can the other participants accept them in their role. When a facilitator or vibes-person wants to join the discussion he or she should give the role (temporarily) to someone else.

**Other roles**

Especially in larger meetings, one can observe other special roles:

**presenters.** Different people can present programs, ideas and reports.

**tone-setters.** Someone who opens and/or closes the meeting with a song or poem.

**greeters.** In large organisational meetings, one or more people can welcome new people and get their names and addresses as they enter the meeting room.

**Responsibility of the whole group!**

Although we use roles of a facilitator, vibes-person, time-keeper and note-taker, this does not mean that *they* are the people that are fully responsible for how a meeting is run. Every meeting is the responsibility of the whole group. The roles are only there to *help* the group taking its responsibility for a motivating and successful meeting. So, when the facilitator makes a mistake, other group members have the duty to help him or her correct this! Everyone is responsible!

**BRAINSTORM**

Brainstorming means literally: a storm in the brain to erupt hidden ideas, just like leaves will start to fly when the wind blows them around.

Brainstorming is free association by all group members to create new ideas on a subject.

A few principles:

- someone writes down all ideas on a poster on the wall;
- everybody's input is important;
- all ideas are interesting and will be noted down;
- no criticism or discussion during the brainstorming;
- systematisation and selection of ideas and arguments starts after the brainstorming;
- crazy and creative ideas are especially welcome: they will lead to new realistic ideas;
- during brainstorming it is not necessary to bother too much about the practical consequences – that comes later during systematisation;
- mostly it is a lot of fun to brainstorm. It breaks a boring discussion and can inspire people to take part in the process.





### 3. Tools

Several tools are available to structure discussions. The most important ones include:

\* **Agenda**

- The agenda lists on, say, one page the points of discussion and the time-schedule for the meeting. Furthermore, it indicates which points have been prepared on paper and by whom.
- The agenda should be made well in advance of the meeting (one week to four days) and spread to the participants together with the invitation and possible preparation papers. This way people are prepared for what comes. They will not be disappointed when a certain point is not discussed and they will more or less have prepared themselves on the points that are.
- To be able to make an agenda the organiser of the meeting should make an inventory amongst the participants of the issues are to be discussed.
- Only when there are very good reasons, and when there is time available, additional points can be put on the agenda at the start of the meeting. This is normally not advisable, however, as some participants might be surprised by this. To avoid a bad atmosphere, at least everyone in the meeting should agree with the alteration of the agenda.

\* **Preparation papers**

Especially for important issues on the agenda of the meeting, preparation papers should be prepared.

- When issues are well prepared on paper, time can be saved and frustrations be avoided during the meeting.
- Preparation papers should give important background information. Remember that only a very limited amount of information can be passed to the participants by the way of speech. On paper it is possible to give much more information.
- Preparation papers should suggest several possible decisions and their consequences, so that unnecessary discussions are avoided. The meeting can then concentrate on suggestions that do not appear on the paper, and on the actual decision.
- Participants should receive the preparation papers with the invitation and agenda well in advance, so that they are able to read them in advance.

\* **Minutes / Report**

- Minutes are the report of the meeting.
- Minutes are made by the note-taker.
- The note-taker makes notes of the meeting during the meeting. *After* the meeting, the note-taker makes a real report from his or her notes. These are distributed to the participants of the meeting and to those people who wanted to participate but couldn't. Sometimes minutes are also used to inform others about the results of the meeting.
- During the next meeting, the minutes are improved and accepted. The facilitator can go through the minutes page by page. Participants can ask for clarifications ("What does this sentence mean? What is the context?") and corrections ("I remember we decided another way. Am I right?").

Minutes are important:

- . to avoid disagreement afterwards about the contents of the decisions made;
- . to remember the arguments used in the decision process;
- . to help the implementation of the decisions taken;
- . to prove that the discussion has been fair and accountable (in a lot of cases minutes have a legal status as evidence);
- . to inform people who could not attend the meeting;
- . to avoid repeating discussions;
- . to evaluate developments within the organisation;
- . to serve as backup information for future decisions and discussions.

The minutes follow the agenda and describe briefly the arguments used in the discussion, decisions taken and tasks divided.



\* **lists of decisions and agreements**

When the meeting has been long, it is handy to attach a list of decisions to the minutes and agreements. In this way, people can easily check what they agreed to do, giving them fewer possibilities to say that they forgot or didn't know.

\* **hand-signs**

To improve the effectiveness of the meeting, it is possible to use uniform hand-signs to indicate that you want to speak, agree, disagree, have a technical remark or that you think that the speaker has been speaking for too long and should get to the point.

## Handsigns

To help the all the group members and the facilitator to be more efficient, you could use non-verbal communication.

Hand signs can be of particularly good use. We mostly use five of them, although you can add more:



**1. "I want to say something"**

Raise your hand with one finger in the air.

When you make this sign, the facilitator will put you in the speaker's list.



**2. Technical remark!"**

Raise two hands, making a "T"

When you have a suggestion to improve the discussion process. The facilitator will directly give you the word.

**DON'T ABUSE THIS SIGN FOR OPINIONS OR DISCUSSIONS!!!**



**3. "You can continue / you repeat"**

Turn your two arms around another

This lets the speaker know that their point has been understood and that he or she can stop talking further. This sign is there to help you; not to criticise what you say. When a lot of people use this sign, also the facilitator can react by stopping the speaker.



**4. "I agree"**

Wave two hands in the air

You agree with what the speaker is saying. When a lot of people make this sign, the speaker or the facilitator can turn the just given idea into a proposal.



**5. "BLOCK!" or "I don't agree"**

Raise your right fist.

You can use this sign in the discussion phase. When a lot of people raise their fist, the speaker knows, there is a lot of opposition. He/she can stop talking or maybe explain better what he/she really means.

In a decision phase, you can raise your fist and yell "BLOCK!" You do this when a proposal is made, which you cannot agree with. It is your veto. In this case the facilitator will ask you why you don't agree.

\* **tools for the facilitator**

- rounds: go around the participants to ask each person's opinion. In this way the opinions of "silent" people are also heard.
- zoom-groups: let people discuss a certain item in groups of two or three people before continuing the discussion in the plenary (this makes the sound of bees and it zooms in on a certain subject).
- ask subgroups for their opinion: especially handy when a minority has large interests in the discussion, but can't get the word because of "louder" people.
- reaching consensus: on topics that have a large influence on the atmosphere of the group it could be good to try to reach consensus. Consensus avoids tensions in future, because every single group-member agrees on the decision.
- opinion poll: to improve the discussion it is sometimes good to know how opinions are divided. Ask for people to show where they stand by raising their hand. This is not a vote!
- voting: some decisions have to be taken under time-pressure. When they do not inflict upon the group atmosphere too much, you can decide by a majority.
- let extremes go out and work out an agreement / decision proposal: when there are strongly opposing people in the group, ask them to go out and work out a proposal or an agreement outside the meeting, which can then be presented in the meeting or one of the next meetings.
- brainstorms (see box in chapter 2)



## 4. A role-play to train meeting techniques

Improving group-meetings is not something that goes automatically when you have enough knowledge. Since every group also needs its informal moments it might be a good idea to use one of these to do a role-play.

There are several roles you can divide here. First of all, of course, the roles of facilitator, note-taker, vibes-person and time-keeper. Besides these you can let some people play a certain type of group-member. Here are some suggestions:

- **the good member.** Tries to cooperate to make the meeting good, to offer constructive ideas during the discussion, to do whatever she/he can to help the organisation. Offers help to do the work needed to carry out the decisions made at the meeting.
- **doctor no.** Is very negative. Whenever someone suggests doing something, he/she explains: "It won't work, nobody wants to do that, that's stupid, etc."
- **the passive or shy member.** Just sits quietly and doesn't say anything unless the facilitator asks a question, which he/she answers shortly and then he/she goes back being quiet again.
- **Mr/Mrs. know-it-all.** Thinks they have answers to all questions and that his/her opinion is more important than everyone else's. Thinks everyone should agree with his/her opinion because he/she is the expert.

### Role-play

A role-play is like a kind of theatre: all the members of the group get a special role to play. Together you then play a meeting.

After this meeting you evaluate together what has happened. We call this de-briefing the role-play. You compare the play with reality and try to figure out together, what you can learn from that.

Role-plays are a very strong tool to understand complicated processes like meetings.

### 2000 Bears

a scenario for a role-play in meeting techniques

In a large mountain area, biologists have calculated that there is enough room for 800 bears. In this situation the bears have enough food (also in winter) not to come out and bother the human inhabitants in the area. However, a dictator of the country has bred a large stock of bears and released them into the area for hunting parties with his guests. The dictator is gone, but there are now 2000 bears in the area. There are regular troubles caused by this surplus of bears. Bears come into the valleys to eat fruit and steal sheep, and sometimes even attack shepherds.

During the role-play, you can try to reach a decision on a fictive problem, from which you know that different people have different opinions. It is even possible to give some of the group members a role to start from a certain position. During the workshop we have used the problem of the 2000 bears (see box). Some of the opinion-roles in this example could be:

- **the conservative biologist:** man has to regulate nature. We can regulate nature here by shooting at least 1200 bears.
- **the local person:** has problems with the bears and wants a fast solution: shoot them!
- **the nature conservationist:** we should regulate the bears with different measurements like cutting off the food, transporting some of them to areas with less bears and shooting some of them.
- **the critical biologist:** shooting the bears will only let them react to the stress. They will have more young bears in the near future, so the problem will repeat itself. The best solution is to better protect the threatened shepherds and animals. The amount of bears will then decrease in a natural way. Transporting them is also no solution, since the bears will be brought to a place where they will not be completely adapted (fauna falsification).
- **the animal protectionist:** we have no right to shoot bears. These bears have a right to live too. Supports the critical biologist, but also sees some possibilities in transporting some bears to areas where there are too little (like the Pyrenees).

Of course it is even more interesting to think out an example yourself, which fits close to the working field of your group. Have fun in learning!



## ATMOSPHERE

Some tips to improve the meeting efficiency and the atmosphere of the meeting:

- Don't repeat what others said when it is not necessary.
- Don't interrupt. Let people finish what they want to say. Interruptions are a heavy instrument of power that can cause tensions.
- Don't attack people, but discuss their opinion. Only very few people are really bad, especially within the ecological movement! And you won't be able to change them within one meeting anyway.
- People don't attend meetings, because they want to hear long monologues, vague discussions, etc. If you give long monologues, you're disturbing your own success.
- Neither do people like to give long monologues, not even the ones that may look like they do. So when someone gives a monologue, don't hesitate to stop him/her and explain why.
- Distinguish group problems from personal ones.
- Solving problems needs a POSITIVE attitude. Negative remarks don't solve problems, they only indicate them.

## MOTIVATE PEOPLE

environmental and social work is important and fun, and we need you!

## EXCHANGE INFORMATION

you're part of the network

## CREATE YOUR VISION

we'll make a better town, country, world

## TAKE ACTION!